# MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1961 35 CENTS

## THE BIG HAUL

By Robert Page Jones

## BUGGED

By Bruno Fischer

EVERY STORY NEW!

VOL. 9, NO. 4 **MANHUNT** AUGUST, 1961

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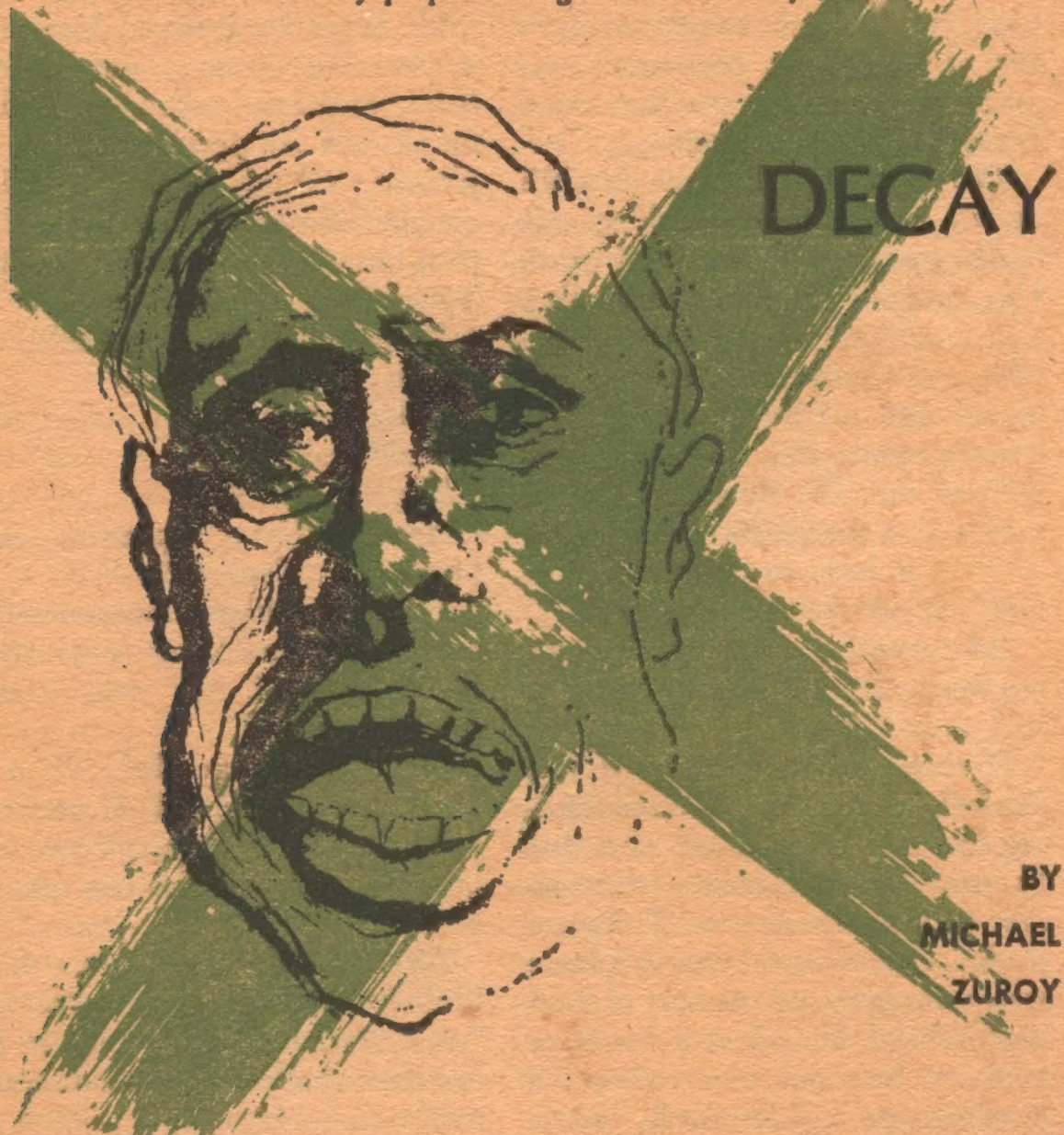
*The tooth was bad alright. But with this patient the tooth was incidental. Dr. Rodney prepared to get to the root of the trouble.*



# DECAY

BY MICHAEL ZUROY

THE DENTIST tied the strings of the protective vestment around the patient's neck and adjusted the aseptic looking white chair so that the patient's head tilted slightly back. He put a fresh paper cup into the receptacle under the thin chromed pipe and, turning the finger knob, filled it with water. The constantly flowing drain, located where a patient could hastily turn to its bowl, made a pleasant swishing sound in the ear. But this patient was not lulled into relaxing; a dentist's office was not a place of pleasure.

"Well, let's have a look," said the dentist cheerfully. He was a trim

man of medium height, somewhere in his forties. The vertical wrinkles that channeled his face and the keen eyes behind the glasses gave him an intelligent, professional appearance. The name on the framed license was Robert Rodney.

The patient felt the dentist's probe gently moving along his teeth, entering the sensitive area. His nerves tightened, anticipating a stab of pain, but relaxed somewhat when the instrument, still gently and painlessly, finished its investigations and withdrew. He realized that Dr. Rodney possessed a sure and competent hand.

"Will it have to come out, doctor?" he asked with false jollity.

"M—mmmn," said Dr. Rodney noncomittally. "Bothers you, does it?"

"I think so," said the patient. Actually, the tooth had been hurting like hell for days, but now that he was in the chair facing an extraction he was not so sure. The glare of the close overhead dentist's lamp was in his eyes and the heat of it on his forehead. He felt at a disadvantage, and he didn't like feeling at a disadvantage with anybody, even a dentist.

The dentist deftly swung the lamp back out of the way, and moved the nose of the X-ray machine into position. "Hold this film with your thumb," he directed, and the machine buzzed. "And this one, finger here," directed the dentist, and the machine buzzed again. Dr. Rodney pushed the machine back and disappeared into a little room.

He reappeared, seated himself at a gleaming counter, and took a blank card from a drawer. "While the X-rays are developing," he explained, "I'll put down a little data on you. Normally, my nurse does this, but she'll be out for a while. Your name, you said, was . . ."

"Taggert. Vance Taggert."

"Ah, yes. Age?"

"Thirty-nine."

"Address?"

Taggert told him.

"How did you happen to come to me, Mr. Taggert?"

"You were highly recommended by a gentleman I know, a Mr. Henry Thornwood. My own dentist recently retired."

Dr. Rodney nodded. "Yes, I know Thornwood well. Have I met you before Mr. Taggert? I have the impression that you're not quite a stranger."

"Well," said Taggert, watching Rodney with some complacency, "you may have heard of me or listened to me. I'm a radio commentator."

An expression of interest appeared on Dr. Rodney's pleasant features. "Of course! Vance Taggert! I should have realized. That vibrant mellow voice. That alert probing expression I've seen in the newspapers. Well! I didn't expect a celebrity in my chair to-day."

Taggert smiled, his dark features

fox-like, basking. They knew him, he thought with satisfaction. Wherever he went, they knew him. It was this, even more than the money, that he worked for. He was not a man to be ignored.

Dr. Rodney went out and returned with the X-ray pictures. He held them up and examined them minutely. "H-mm," he said. Taggert did not like the way he said it. "Have you felt pain in your ear?" the dentist asked.

"Yes, some."

"I don't wonder. The tooth will have to come out. There's a spreading infection there. And a good deal of inflammation." Dr. Rodney began to busy himself at the sterilizer. "Best do it immediately. It wouldn't be wise to wait."

"O.K., doc." Taggert made his tone light, but he felt a sinking, trapped sensation. He loathed this handling of his private flesh and bone. He feared the wrenching separation that would violate his jaw.

"You won't feel anything," said Doctor Rodney, reading his mind with long experience of patients. "I'll give you an injection, of course. In order to make sure you're comfortable, I'm going to give you something a little different than the ordinary injection. This is because of the inflammation. The anesthesia will have to be a little stronger to block the pain. It will put you into a brief torpor."

"You're the doctor." Taggert forced a smile. Dr. Rodney approached him, delicately holding the hypodermic needle. Taggert closed his eyes. Feeling was bad enough; he didn't have to watch the details of the damn operation. He felt Rodney's hands moving his head, and reluctantly he cooperated. "Open wide," instructed Rodney. He felt the sudden sharp pain as the needle penetrated his flesh, pushing far in. He wanted to gag, but bore it, and after a while the needle withdrew.

He opened his eyes and watched Rodney put the hypodermic away and seat himself comfortably on a chair. "Might as well relax a bit," said Rodney. "It'll be a little while before the injection takes effect."

"Um," said Taggert, still feeling the needle.

"Yours must be an interesting profession," said the dentist in a chatty manner.

"I enjoy it."

"Apparently your audience does too. Although, I never could see the necessity of your placing such emphasis on—shall we say—gossipy items?"

"The public likes it," said Taggert stiffly. "There are enough general news and political commentators. I supply the human interest that people crave. My program is based on personal items."

"Oh, yes, of course, but don't you sometimes have qualms about invading personal privacy? Don't you wonder if your broadcasts

might harm innocent individuals? Forgive me, Mr. Taggert, but there are times when it seems to me you come perilously close to slander."

Taggert sighed wearily. Criticism of his methods was an old story to him. He was never bothered by it. It was a tough world. He looked out for himself. Let others do likewise. He replied, "I can't worry about that. I do a chatter broadcast. I can't pull any punches; I hear a juicy item, I announce it. Anybody thinks I'm slandering them, they're at liberty to sue me." Dr. Rodney agreed, "Of course." There was a little silence. Then Dr. Rodney said softly, "But isn't it possible that some poeple may not have the means to carry on a lawsuit? Or that there may be those who are too sensitive to have their private lives dragged through the courts and newspapers? I imagine a lot of dubious statements might go unchallenged this way."

"I don't know," said Taggert indifferently. "I don't think about it. I try to tell the truth."

"Do you, Mr. Taggert? Do you really? But how is it possible for you to check the thousands of items you broadcast?"

"Well, naturally, I can't do that. But I've got a pretty good instinct, doc. I rely upon my instinct."

"Oh. I wonder how many tempting items your instinct actually turns down?"

Taggert sat up in his chair and stared at the dentist. This was getting too thick. He was used to criticism, but he wouldn't put up with insults. "Look here, doc . . ."

"Or how many juicy items you make up yourself?"

"Now, wait a minute . . ."

"Or why every item must be shouted to the world even if true? There are such things as charity. Mercy. When people have hurt no one but themselves, why should they be hurt by others? We've all buried mistakes."

Furious, Taggert snarled, "I don't give a damn whether you approve of me or not. I came here for dental attention and if I'm going to get a lecture . . ."

Suddenly Dr. Rodney smiled disarmingly. "My friends know me as a great kidder, Mr. Taggert. I beg your pardon."

Taggert continued to stare, doubtfully, at the dentist. "Well, if you were only kidding . . ."

"How do you feel, Mr. Taggert? The anesthetic should be taking effect by now. Do you begin to feel a numbness in your cheeks? A difficulty in working your facial muscles? A heaviness in your head?"

"Well, yes," mumbled Taggert, sinking back into the chair. "I do feel that way."

"Fine. We can get at that extraction in a few minutes." The dentist smiled, and to Taggert there was something enigmatic about that smile. He wanted to struggle up again and say that he had changed

his mind about having the tooth pulled, but an increasing lethargy bound him. This tilted position was comfortable, and growing more so. He felt himself sinking back into warm comfort, aware that the dentist's voice was going on, sounding more and more distant.

"Seriously," Doctor Rodney was saying, "you ought to be proud of the tremendous influence your program has. A few words from you and people's lives are touched, changed forever. And these, in turn, change other lives dependent upon them, and still others. That mellow voice of yours creates countless ripples, you know that. You have power, Mr. Taggert."

Yes, thought Taggert sleepily. Power. Power was the headiest wine. People cringed before you. People whined for favors. People jumped to attention.

"I don't suppose it's possible to count the thousands of lives you've changed, but it must be very many because even I am personally acquainted with a few of your cases. I knew Andrei Lassko, for example. Do you remember the name? No? Well, of course, there have been so many, you can't be expected to remember. Lassko was a great composer of music, a great conductor. You spread the rumour that Lassko did not write his own music, that a few underpaid hirelings did it for him. An amusing little item to you, but it ruined Lassko. The charge was untrue.

"There was State Senator Tom Berman. A brilliant, honest servant of the people, a type that the country badly needs, with a fine career ahead of him. You made quite a splash by claiming that Berman had underworld ties. You were acclaimed for your fearless expose, but you had nothing to fear; the underworld was not involved. But the public did not forget your attack, and Berman's career was finished.

"There was Dr. Stansky, the physicist. An easy name to attack. You called him subversive. Years later, an investigation finally cleared him, but his reputation had been damaged and his work interrupted. The country was the loser.

"I might mention the financier, Paul Jackson. You accused him of running a stock swindle. Not directly, of course; it would have been dangerous in this case. But your innuendo was enough. Jackson lost a fortune.

"There are, of course, your innumerable bedroom scandals, your bread and butter, I might say. Illicit affairs, illegitimate children, you do a fine job on them." The dentist looked at Taggert steadily and continued softly. "Mrs. Dan Sprague. You wouldn't remember that name, would you? You linked her name to that of a notorious actor. A bedroom scandal. Untrue, but her husband could not be convinced of that. He left her. She committed suicide."

"Not responsible," mumbled Taggart. "Not responsible for . . . crazy things . . . people do."

"It must be a comfort not to feel responsible," said Dr. Rodney's voice. His features wavered and blurred before Taggert's eyes. "By the way, just to show you how many people you've reached, did you know that Henry Thornwood, the man who sent you to me, is the brother of a lady whose character you've blackened?"

"No," mumbled Taggert. "Didn't . . . know." Didn't care either. Didn't care about anything. Darkness was coming. Comfortable darkness. Warm sleep. . . .

Clarity returned. First fuzzy images, then sharpness.

Nothing seemed to have changed; Dr. Rodney still stood before him looking competent and professional. His head and jaw was still numb, devoid of feeling, except for a warm wetness in his mouth.

"Spit out," said Dr. Rodney pleasantly, indicating the basin with its flowing drain.

"It would have been worse if I hadn't cauterized," said Rodney.

Taggert realized that the smell in his nostrils was that of singed flesh and that it came from his own mouth.

"Here's the tooth," said Dr. Rodney. He picked up a decayed molar with long roots. "It was far gone, as you see."

What Taggert started to reply, the sentence that formed in his mind was, "Yes, I'm glad it's out," but no words came from his mouth, only a strange croak. To a man who was used to controlling his voice like a tool, this was startling. Probably the after effects of the injection. He tried again, and heard the same croak.

Taggert realized he had been looking at something on the tray before him, a longish, pointed, fleshy object. It was an object that had no business in a dentist's office.

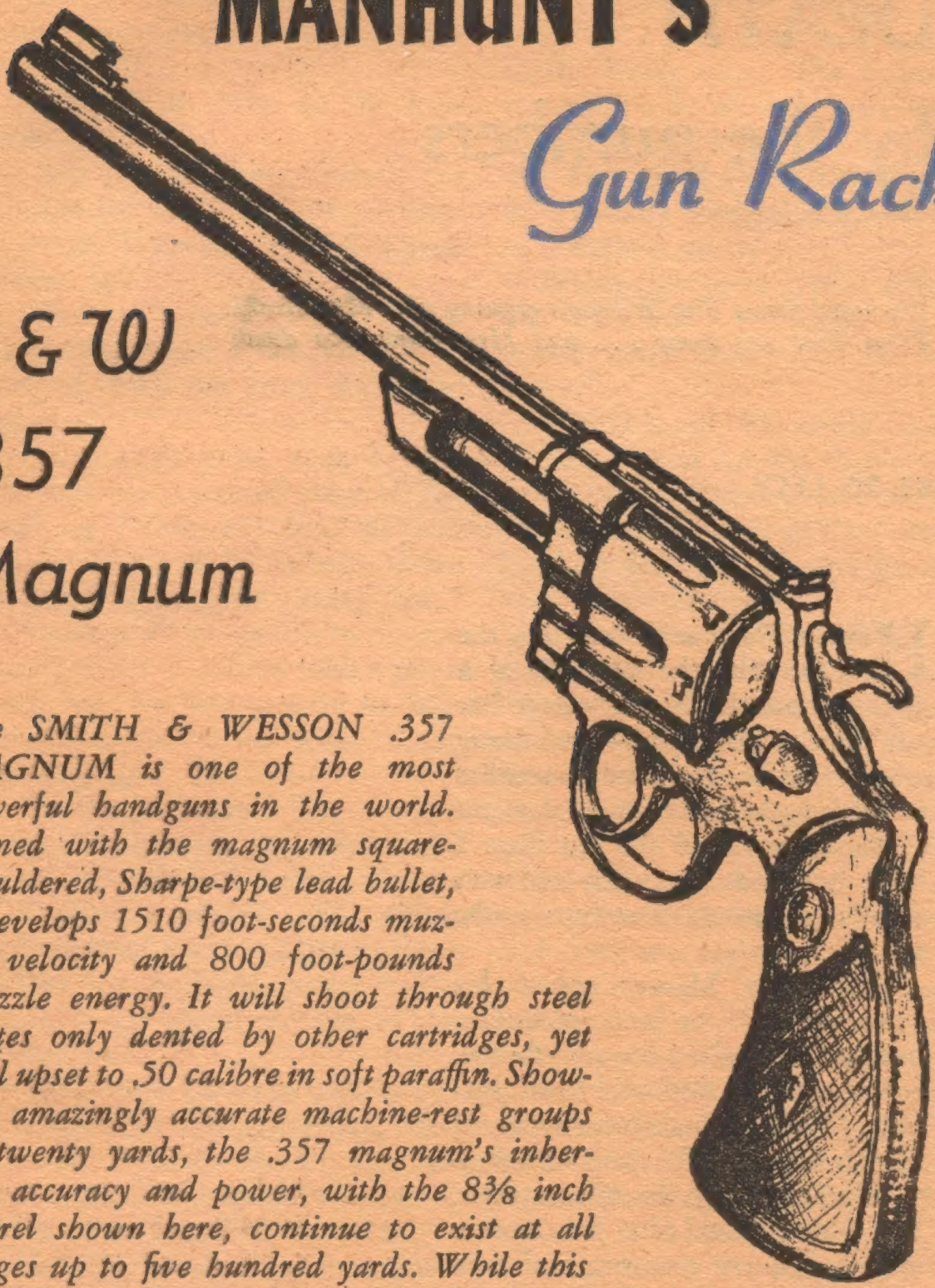
Taggert took a long time at understanding because this was not something that could be accepted. To believe it would open the gates to horror.

"There will be a good deal of pain later," said Dr. Rodney, still pleasantly, "but you'll live through it. I think this should bring home to you the point that you've made enemies. I merely represent some of your enemies. Mrs. Sprague, the girl who took her own life, was my daughter." Dr. Rodney went on, "You may wish to prefer charges against me. I must warn you that if you do so, your enemies will take the next step, the final step. I rather think that you'll drop the matter."

Dr. Rodney reached into the tray and picked up Taggert's tongue. "Yes," he said, "the tooth had to come out, but so did this. It is a diseased and poisonous member. It had to be extracted."

# MANHUNT'S

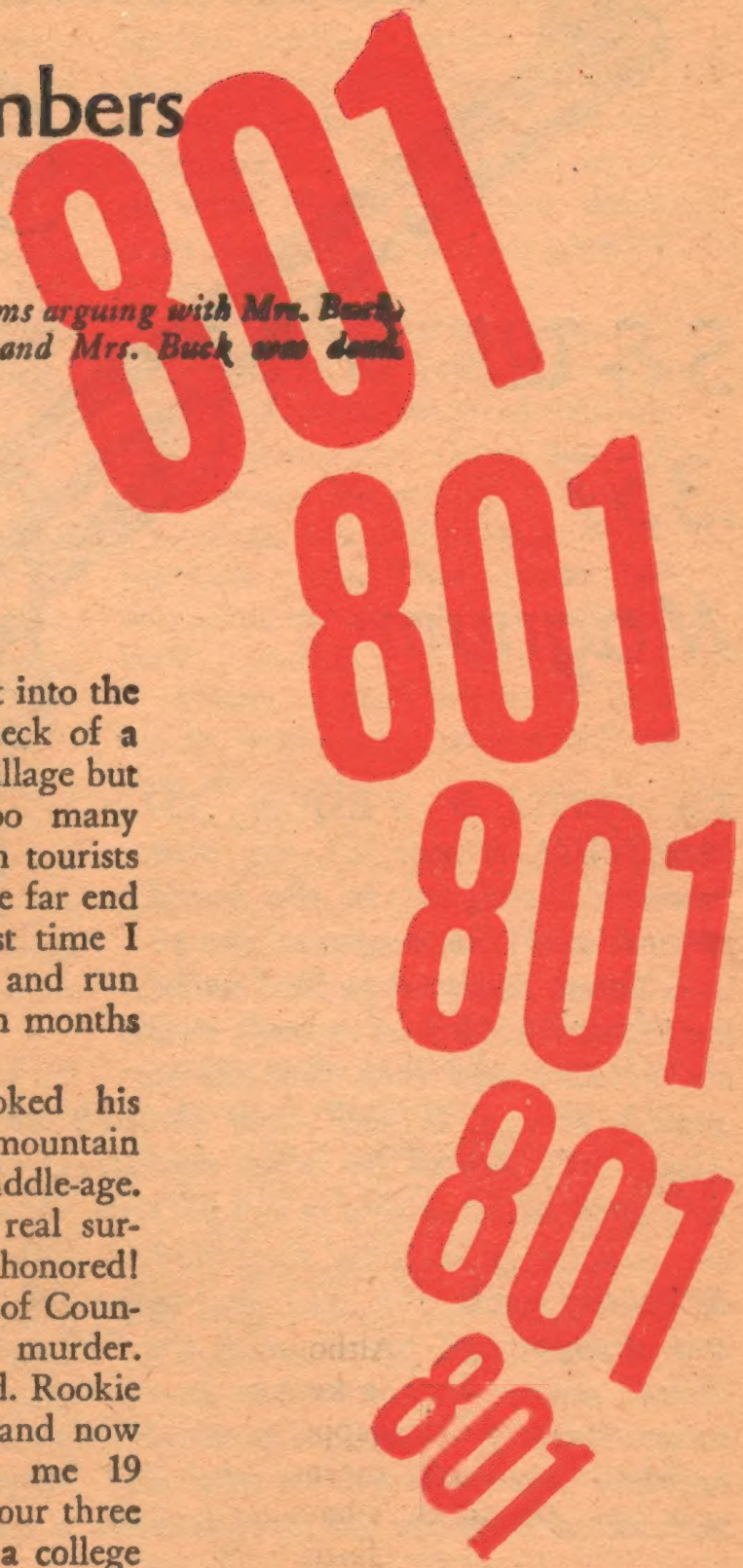
## Gun Rack



## S & W .357 Magnum

*The SMITH & WESSON .357 MAGNUM is one of the most powerful handguns in the world. Armed with the magnum square-shouldered, Sharpe-type lead bullet, it develops 1510 foot-seconds muzzle velocity and 800 foot-pounds muzzle energy. It will shoot through steel plates only dented by other cartridges, yet will upset to .50 calibre in soft paraffin. Showing amazingly accurate machine-rest groups at twenty yards, the .357 magnum's inherent accuracy and power, with the 8⅜ inch barrel shown here, continue to exist at all ranges up to five hundred yards. While this revolver is chambered for the .357 Magnum cartridge, its effectiveness with all the .38 specials make it one of the great handguns.*

# DEATH by the numbers




*The maid heard Tim Williams arguing with Mrs. Buck. Then Tim ran away . . . and Mrs. Buck was dead.*

**BY ED LACY**

HARBOR POINT sticks out into the ocean like the fat neck of a steamer clam. It's a rich village but not much for action—too many solid residents, not enough tourists or working stiffs. It's at the far end of the county and the last time I came here was for a hit and run manslaughter—about seven months ago.

Chief Bob Moore looked his same hick-self; a man mountain running to lard in his middle-age. Seeing me he said with real surprise, "Well, well, ain't we honored! Hardly expected the *head* of County Homicide up for this murder. You sure climbed fast, Jed. Rookie investigator last summer and now it's *Inspector Jed.* Took me 19 years to become Chief of our three man police force. Proves a college

education pays off." His sarcasm was followed by a stupid grin of his thick mouth and bad teeth.

"I guess it helps," I said, paying no attention to his ribbing.

"Never could figure out why you ever wanted to be a cop, Jed. You're not only young but . . . well, you don't *even look* like a police officer. A runt with narrow shoulders and that brush haircut . . . hell, you'd pass for a juvenile delinquent of the hotrod set. In my day the first requirement for a cop was to look like the law, big and tough. Man, when my 275 pounds and six-four comes along, why it's the same as another badge. When I say move, a guy moves!"

"Don't worry about my being tough, Moore. Also, it's far too early in the day for corny lines like the bigger they come . . . You've had your gassy lecture, let's get to work. Who was the murdered woman . . . Mrs. Buck?"

"Widow, nice sort of woman. Comfortably fixed. Ran a fair-sized farm. Came to the Harbor as a bride and . . . Don't worry Jed, this one is in the bag. I know the killer, have the only road off the peninsula covered."

"Yeah, passed your road block as I drove in," I said, sitting on his polished desk. Although Bob dressed like a slob, he kept a neat office. "Okay, what happened?"

"About nine this morning Mrs. Buck phones me she's having trouble with one of her farm hands—money trouble. Colored fellow named Tim Williams—only hand she has working for her now. Tim come with the migratory workers that follow the crops up from the South last year, but Tim and his wife settled here. Never had no trouble with him before, thought he was a hard worker, hustling around to get a full week's work. Anyway, Julia asks me to. . . ."

"Julia?"

"Come on, *Inspector*, look alive. Julia Buck, the deceased," Moore said, slipping me his smug, idiot-grin again. "Julia asks me to come out at once. But she didn't sound real alarmed . . . you know, like there was any immediate danger. I got there at 9:47 A.M., found her strangled. I would have come sooner if I'd known. . . . No doubt about Tim being the killer—I have a witness. Don't know why the County had to send anybody up here. Told them I can handle this."

"Yeah, seems you have a nice package, with all the strings tied. Who's . . .?"

"I'll collar Tim before night."

"Who's your witness?"

"Julia had—has—an old Indian woman cooking for her—Nellie Harris. Probably the last of the original Island Indians. Nellie was in the kitchen, had just come to work, when she heard Tim arguing with Julia in the living room. Swears she recognized his voice, that Tim yelled, 'It's my money and I want it!' and then rushed out

of the house. Then she heard Julia phone me. Nellie went on with her house work—until I found Julia dead. And before you say it, Nellie ain't near strong enough to have strangled Julia. There's no doubt this Tim sneaked back and killed Mrs. Buck. Another fact: Tim's disappeared—on the run. But there's no way off the Point except through my road block. Guess you want to see the body—have her up the street in Doc Abel's office."

"Let's see it."

We walked up Main Street to this big white house, then around to the back. Being the Harbors sole doctor, Abel was also its Medical Examiner. The corpse was on a table, covered by a sheet. Doc Abel was busy up front with some of his live patients. Pulling back the sheet, I examined the bruises around Julia Buck's once slender throat. Powerful hands had killed her. "Find any prints?"

Chief Moore shook his big head, seemed lost in thought as he stared at the nude body. Then he said, "Never noticed it before . . . I mean, when she was dressed . . . but for a woman her age, Julia had a real fine figure."

I dropped the sheet, glanced at my watch. It was almost one and I hadn't had lunch. Still, I wanted to get this over with, had a lot of paper work waiting in my own office. I told him, "I want to go see the Buck house."

"Sure."

Walking back down Main Street, I said, "I saw the Harbor's one squad car at the road block, we'll ride out in my car."

"Naw, we'll use mine," Moore said, opening the door of a sleek white Jaguar roadster. As I slid in beside him he said, "Some heap, hey? Got a heck of a buy on this, dirt cheap."

"Yeah, it's a real load," I told him, looking up the street at my battered Ford.

Five racing minutes later we pulled into the driveway of this typical two-story house, and when the Jaguar stopped I managed to swallow. There was a garage and a modern barn in the rear, all of it standing between two large flat fields planted in early potatoes. Everything shouted gentleman farming, the kind of grandfather-father-to son folding money the Point is known for. The fins of a Caddy were sticking out of the garage, while the inside of the house was a comfortable mixture of old and expensive contemporary furniture.

Nellie Harris wasn't old, she was ancient—a tiny shriveled woman with a face like a tan prune. She was also stone deaf in her right ear. She calmly repeated what Moore had told me. When I asked, "Why didn't you go into the living room to see how Mrs. Buck was?" the old gal stared at me with her hard eyes, said, "She didn't call. I do the living room last. I went up stairs

and did the bath and her bedroom —way I always do in the morning."

"Have you any idea what this Tim and Mrs. Buck were arguing about?"

"Probably wages. Miss Julia was a hard woman with a dollar. Years ago when I asked her to put me in Social Security, so's I wouldn't have to be working now, Miss Julia threatened to fire me—all because it would mean a few more dollars a year to her."

"Did you hear Tim return?"

"No sir. Nobody came until Chief Moore."

I drummed on the kitchen table with my pencil. "Mrs. Buck have any men friends?"

"Her?" The wrinkled mouth laughed, revealing astonishingly strong, white, teeth. "I never see none. But then I wasn't her social secretary."

"Was she on friendly terms with other members of her family?"

"Didn't have no family—around here. They had a son—killed in the war."

I walked into the living room. There didn't seem to be any signs of a struggle. I told Moore, "Where does Tim's wife live?"

"I'll take you there. Look Jed, this is an open and shut case and I have to relieve my men at the road block soon. Okay, come on."

We did 80 miles an hour across a hard dirt road to a cluster of shacks. In late summer migratory workers lived five and six to a room in these. Now they were empty, except for a cottage across the road.

Mrs. Tim Williams was about 21, with skin the color of bitter chocolate, and if you discounted the plain dress and worn slippers, she was startlingly pretty. The inside of their place was full of new furniture, five bucks down and a buck a week stuff, but all of it clean and full of the warmth of a home.

Mrs. Williams was both sullen and frightened. She said she didn't know a thing—Tim had left the house at six in the morning, as usual. She hadn't seen him since.

"Did Mrs. Buck owe him any wages?" I asked.

"Well, for this week, but they wasn't due 'till Saturday. Listen, Mr. Inspector, no matter what anybody say, my Tim didn't kill that woman! Tim is a good man, hard working. He strong as a bull but gentle as a baby. Even if he angry, Tim wouldn't hurt a woman. He never in his life took a hand to a woman or . . ."

"We'll get him soon, see what he says," Chief Moore cut in.

"Does your husband have a car?" I asked.

"Got us an old station wagon. Need it for the job."

I asked a silly question: "You've no idea where your husband could be, now?"

She shook her head. I knew she was lying. I stood there, staring at her for a moment—thinking mostly of her beauty and her poverty.

Moore said, "Come on, Jed, I have to get to my men."

On my way out I told her, "If you should . . . eh . . . just happen to see your husband, get him to give himself up. He'll get a fair trial. Hiding out like this won't get him anything, except more trouble, or a bullet."

"Yes. I'll tell him—*if* I see him."

We made it back to the Harbor in less than four minutes. I tried not to act scared. That Jaguar could really barrel along. I told Moore I was going to eat, get some forms filled out by Doc Abel.

Chief Moore said, "If I don't see you when I return, see you for certain at my road block, Inspector."

I had a bowl of decent chowder, phoned the Doc and he said he'd leave the death statements with his girl—in a half hour. Lighting my pipe, I took a walk. The Harbor is a big yachting basin in the summer. Even now, there were several slick cruisers tied to the dock, an ocean-going yawl anchored inside the breakwater. There was a 34 foot Wheeler with CHIEF BOB'S in big gold letters on its stern also tied up at the dock. It wasn't a new boat, about five years old, but fitted with fishing outriggers and chairs. I asked an old guy running a fishing station if the boat was Moore's. He said, "You bet. Bob Moore is plumb crazy about blue fishing."

I dropped into the doctor's office, picked up my forms. As I was walking back to the Police Station, which was in the same building with the City Hall and Post Office, I saw Mrs. Tim Williams sneaking into the back of my car. If she moved gracefully, she was clumsy at it.

I got in the front seat. She was 'hiding' on the floor of the back seat, the soft curves of her back and hips—rousing lines. I drove out of the Harbor, turned off into a dirt road among the scrub pine trees and stopped. I waited a few minutes and she sat up. For another moment we didn't talk, then she began to weep. She mumbled, "I just know that Chief Moore is out to kill my Tim!"

"Maybe. I never saw him so anxious before," I said, lighting my pipe and offering her a cigarette. "Of course, it could be because this is his first murder case. You know where Tim is, don't you, Mrs. Williams?"

She puffed on the cigarette slowly, sitting slumped against the back seat; didn't answer. I hadn't expected her to. Then, almost as if talking to herself, she said, "Mister Inspector, it took us a long time and lots of hard work to come up here . . . just so we could live with some dignity. Chopping cotton down there, you're like an animal. Tim, he works hard, not much of a drinking man. Got ambition, always talking about he has to leave farm work, maybe get us a gas station. He's good with motors, too. Two weeks ago he had the

dream. Then, couple days later, we both had it."

"What dream?"

"Tim, he dream he driving a racing car with a big 801 on it. Then I have this dream where I'm looking at a fine new house. The number on it was 80 First Street. That same night, Tim he dream he's counting pennies—they come to $8.01. Now . . . sure, we play some numbers up here, a dime, a quarter, a day. We play 801. The first day nothing like it comes out. But we keep the number in. Then 865 hits. Then 110 comes up. Yesterday we puts ten dollars on 801. It come in—$6000 we wins! This is the real dream for us. $6000 for poor people. You understand?"

I nodded. "You get paid off, this morning?"

"Oh yes, this is a good numbers outfit around here. Early this morning Tim go see the man, gets the $6000. Tim give him $400 as a tip. Think of that—a $400 tip! You see the kind of good man my Tim is, even with all that money he ain't for losing a day's work. Also, he afraid to leave the money with me—somebody might try rob us. He drives to Mrs. Buck's, asks her to please put this envelope in her safe for him, 'till he ready to quit in the afternoon. She take it but opens the envelope—asks where he got all that money. Tim, he have to tell her he hit the number big. But Mrs. Buck think he stole it. Say she calling the police, the Federal government. Tim, he snatch the money from her and run. Ain't done no wrong, the money his. He never see her again. God's truth, mister. I'm going to have a child: I swear it on my baby!"

She began to cry again. Starting the car, I drove her home. Stopping before their cottage, I told her, "Listen to me carefully. You know where Tim is. You tell him. . . ."

"I don't know!"

"Come on—listen! Tell him to stay hidden for a few more hours. Be sure he doesn't try to make a break for it—he'll be killed. Have him home at 5 P.M. Now, remember this, *you never talked to me just now*. After Tim returns, if the police come, Tim is *not* to say one word about hitting the numbers. If he does, the Feds will tax the money, take most of it. Understand me?"

"Yes. But what he tell the police?"

"Tim's story is he was feeling sick, couldn't work, asked Mrs. Buck for his wages. When she wouldn't pay him, he went to sleep in the woods, didn't know a thing about her being killed until you told him when he returned home. Got that straight?"

She nodded.

"Remember, the *only* time you spoke to me was when I was out with Chief Moore. You say otherwise, I'll come back and throw Tim under the jail!"

She stared at me, dark face full

of suspicion. "You don't think Tim done it?"

"I'm sure he didn't. I'm trying to help you."

"All right, I tell him."

"Remember what I said, nothing about hitting the numbers."

"I remember."

I let her out of the car and drove to Mrs. Buck's house. Nellie Harris was cleaning the kitchen, as if nothing had happened. I was inside the kitchen before she even heard my steps. She grunted at me, "You again. Probably close the house. Don't like leaving a dirty place."

"Nellie, after Tim and Mrs. Buck had their argument and he left, what did Mrs. Buck do?"

"Told you: I heard her phone Chief Moore."

"What did she tell him?"

"How would I know? I don't hear too well, especially when a body is talking right into the phone."

"Then, how do you know she phoned him?"

"When she starts dialing the phone makes a kind of ringing sound. I can hear that real good."

"After that, did she phone anybody else?"

"No sir."

"You're positive there was only *one* phone call?"

"Positive."

I drove back to the Harbor police station. A young fellow, a 'special' judging by his badge number, was holding down the desk. Specials work part-time, mostly directing traffic on weekends. We sat around and gassed about nothing. Moore came in a half hour later, told the special to take off. Putting his fat behind in the desk chair he told me, "That bastard didn't show. I hate to start combing these woods. All the summer cottages he could be holed up in."

Moving my chair so I blocked the door, I took out my gun, asked, "Bob, why did you kill Julia Buck?"

"What? Jed, have you gone crazy? I . . ." He started to get up.

"Sit there—hands on top of your desk! Tim Williams hit the numbers today for six grand. Don't bull me, Moore, the numbers couldn't operate here without you getting a cut."

"I've been an honest cop all my life! Never. . . ."

"Cut the slop! Bob, you're stupid as hell. Everybody in the Harbor knows your take home pay isn't sixty a week—the Harbor votes on it every year. Yet you're sporting a flashy Jag, a cabin cruiser. What was the numbers syndicate paying you—$100 a week for protection?"

"That's goddamn lie! Got me a good buy on the car. The boat is old and . . ."

"On sixty a week? I'll tell you what happened: when Mrs. Buck phoned she told you Tim said he'd won the dough on a hit, that she was calling the Feds. You told her to wait, you'd be right out. Riding

there you were worried sick; if there was a Federal stink and the numbers racket ruined here, put an end to your weekly sugar. So you parked your Jag, sneaked into the house, killed Mrs. Buck, then drove up minutes later as if you'd just arrived. Nellie Harris never heard a thing. Now you figure on gunning Tim—maybe even getting his six grand. Killing Mrs. Buck was even more stupid than buying a Jaguar, showing off your money. Bob, you got muscles for brains!"

Moore's fat face was a chalk pumpkin. "I thought . . ."

"I know, you thought you were helping the numbers gang, but you did exactly the opposite by panicking! Even if the Feds knew of Tim's hit, outside of taxing him, what could they have done? The racket would have died down for a few weeks here, that's all. But a murder is the last thing the syndicate wants.

"Listen, Jed, give me a break! I'll kill this Negro farm hand and nobody. . . ."

"You idiot, you think his wife will stand still for that? Bob, I'm going to give you a break," I said softly. "You kidded me before about not being tough, a muscleman like you. I'll show you how tough I can be. We're going to forget the numbers bit—spin a different story. You and Julia Buck were lovers."

"What?" His bloodshot eyes became alert. "Who told you that silly bunk?"

"You did, Bob. You confessed to me you killed her because she was turning you out. That's what she told you over the phone."

Now his big face looked so confused it was comical. "What good does that do me?"

"You told me that after I said I might have found your prints on Mrs. Buck's neck. Then . . ."

"Jed, I was careful about prints."

I giggled at him. "Lord, you're a dumbox! I didn't finish our new story: you told me that and went for your gun. I had to kill you, Moore."

He stared at me for a long second. A single drop of sweat zig-zagged down one fat cheek. Then he whispered, "That's odd talk for the County Inspector."

"I know it is. But now I'm talking for the syndicate.

"*You?* You're . . . the big boy?"

"Not the big boy, but near the top. Your stupid murder of Mrs. Buck could have spoiled our whole set-up," I said, and shot him twice around the heart.

He merely swayed, then his big body slumped back in his chair, slack mouth open. While the office thundered with the sound of my shots, I jumped across the room, yanked his .38 Police Special from his holster—holding it with my coat—stuck it into his right hand as if he had gone for his gun.

I turned and ran for the door, to call for help. . . .

# It's the Law

Collected by Floyd Hurl

## In Lebanon, Tennessee

there's a statute forbidding a husband to kick his wife out of bed if she has cold feet. The wife, however, is completely within the law if she kicks her husband out of bed for any reason at all.

## In Florida

it's a criminal offense to hire away your neighbor's cook.

## In Quaker City, Pennsylvania

there is a law that requires all men to carry their guns to church.

## In Michigan

the husband is the legal owner of all his wife's clothes.

## In Winchester, Massachusetts

a local regulation says that a young girl may not dance on a tight-rope except in church.

## In Pennsylvania

there is a measure that would take away the driver's license for ninety days of anyone who asks for or receives help in voting.

## In Missouri

it's the law that any widow or spinster who turns down a man's proposal of marriage must pay a $100 fine and darn the man's socks and sew on his buttons for six months.

# FINGER-MAN

*"Find my husband!" the woman said. And she dropped five fifties on Bill Sweeney's desk.*

*A Novelette*

By
JOHN
CONNOLLY

I HAD been testifying in court all morning and hoisting a few highballs after lunch to forget about it. As a private cop you fight a hot and cold war with the police department on most cases, then you give testimony in their favor at the trial and a defense attorney hashes you up. Afterwards, you get to feeling like the inside of a sandwich. You wonder why you don't work a straight forty-hour week on a sensible job and make a regular buck like the rest of the citizenry. The answer evades you, the drinks are medicinal.

This was October, a good month in San Francisco, when the days are bright and warm after the fog lifts in the mornings. The Giants had finished in the first division, the Forty-Niners looked good to win their first National League flag, and work was starting on the second bay bridge. Barring war and taxes, things looked bright for the eight to five o'clock shift. I was between cases again.

Hilda Hansen smiled up from her typing as I came into the partitioned cubby hole which housed Eureka Investigations. "There's a Mrs. Anne Donaldson inside," she informed me. "She's been waiting twenty minutes. I called you at Hanrahan's but they said the bum just left."

"Must have been some other Bill Sweeney," I said and went into my office.

Mrs. Donaldson sat placidly in front of my uncluttered desk, facing the view of the garage outside the window. She was a well tanned, well turned platinum blonde in a plaid skirt and tweed jacket. She smiled at me with blue green eyes and lightly rouged lips. We introduced ourselves and I took the swivel chair behind the desk. She was hatless and lively looking, like she belonged behind the wheel of a convertible with the top down speeding up the highway toward Lake Tahoe or Yosemite.

I offered her a cigarette and lit one for myself when she refused. She came straight to the point. "My ex-husband, Robert Donaldson, has been missing for almost two weeks, Mr. Sweeney. What's more important," she said angrily, her eyes more green than blue, "he has missed an alimony payment." She opened one of those Mexican carved leather handbags that will hold enough provisions for a week end in the country and fished out a small snapshot. She handed it across the desk. "I want you to find him for me."

The photo was of a young man in his twenties. He was wearing a corporal's uniform, sitting behind a table full of drinks in a patent leather booth and obviously enjoying himself. The snapshot was apparently new and I asked Mrs. Donaldson if he was AWOL from the Army.

"No. That was taken just after we were married in 1944."

"You must have been a very young bride."

She colored slightly under the tan and said, "Thank you."

"What does your husband do, Mrs. Donaldson?"

"He's a salesman with the Mayflower Shirt Company."

"Have you notified any of the authorities?"

"Yes. I checked on him when the alimony didn't turn up and learned he hadn't been to work or anything. Then I notified the police. They haven't found anything except that he was last seen in Crescent City two weeks ago. He made a business call there and that's the last anyone's heard of him."

Mrs. Donaldson reached into her bag again and withdrew five fifty dollar bills, placed them on my desk and looked at me expectantly. It was a wonderful way to do business and I hadn't been exposed to it much. When I caught my breath I said, "You really do want to find him."

"Ours wasn't one of those civilized divorces," she explained. "We don't get on and I wouldn't put it past Bob to leave the state, or even the country, to avoid his support payments."

"Have you been divorced long?"

"A year." She spoke in a clear, warm voice that matched the depth of her eyes. She showed a kind of armed neutrality when she talked about her husband, but she was extremely interested in finding him.

I asked the usual questions: who his friends were, how did he shape up on liquor, gambling, sex. Bob was from Utah originally and they had met and married here, while he was in the service. After his discharge, they lived together for only a few months. They had no mutual friends with whom he associated after she left him.

"Bob drank, but only moderately," Mrs. Donaldson said. "I don't think he gambled much. As for women . . . Well, let's say he liked them and you have his picture in front of you."

According to the snapshot Donaldson was a handsome character. He had wavy dark hair, good features and a square jaw with a reckless smile sitting in it. I decided that if he liked women they'd like him back.

Was there anyone in particular he might have gone off with?"

"I don't know," she said evenly. "That's what the money is for. Is it enough for a retainer?"

It was more than enough and I said it would do for a start. I asked where her husband had been living, jotted down the Van Ness Avenue address she gave me.

"I'm at the Westshire, apartment nine," Mrs. Donaldson said, getting up. "Is there any more I can tell you?" Standing, she was taller than I thought, her legs were longer. I should have asked her to take off the jacket when I came in. You've got to make a client comfortable.

"Are you in business in San Francisco, Mrs. Donaldson?" I asked.

"No." She smiled and her eyes became sea blue. I could see her ornamenting the terrace lounge at the fashionable Westshire, a little soft music in the background. "Don't let the Nob Hill lodgings throw you, Mr. Sweeney. My home is in Oakland. I'm staying at the Westshire until we get this matter straightened out."

I stood up and opened the door for her. "What shall I do about your husband, when and if I find him?"

"Call me and I'll come at once," she said. "I'll have it out with him. If that doesn't work we'll have to take other steps. And I'm sure you'll find him for me, Mr. Sweeney."

Back at my desk I phoned the Westshire Apartments and asked for Mrs. Donaldson. She was registered but wasn't in just now, would I care to leave a message? I said no, and hung up.

I was counting the pictures of Ulysses S. Grant, one of our finest Presidents I think, for the fifth time when Hilda Hansen entered. She grinned at the bills and reached out her hand. I gave her three of them.

Hilda said, "We're in business again."

"We're still in business," I corrected.

She bristled a little. "Are you going to tell me about it, or do I have to hire a detective to find out what my boss is doing?"

I told her about it.

"I hope nothing's happened to him," she commented, gazing dreamily at the photo of Robert Donaldson.

"Don't worry. He's probably latched onto some rich tomato on his route," I said. "You know these traveling salesmen."

"I don't," Hilda remarked acidly, "but, unlike some people I know, he appears to be a nice clean cut young man." Hilda came into second hand contact with all the crud I did business with, typed my reports, kept the files and was sharper than most sergeants. Still, she always managed the optimistic view.

"Set the machinery in motion," I told her. "Find Jack Holland and tell him to light someplace where we can get hold of him. I'll phone you later."

Hilda nodded. She was staring at the snapshot again. I picked it up and left the office.

## TWO

The Mayflower Shirt Company is a square, two-storied, corner building on lower Mission Street with display rooms under the main offices. I went in the side entrance and upstairs, past an idle switchboard to where a girl at a wide flat desk with three phones on it guarded a labyrinth of frosted glass cubicles. I asked for the boss.

The girl looked me over. "Who shall I say?"

"Bill Sweeney."

She flipped a switch and picked up the receiver of one of the three phones, "Mr. Sweeney to see Mr. Booker." She paused and asked me, "What do you want to see him about?"

I told her it was personal business. She relayed the information, nodded agreeably at the receiver and hung up. She said, "Follow me," and led me through the labyrinth to a back corner of the building where she opened a door with "Sales Manager's Office" stencilled on the frosted glass. She said, "This is Mr. Sweeney," to another girl behind another desk with three phones on it, and left me.

"Go right in," the new girl motioned to a door behind her.

The office wasn't the glassed-in enclosure I expected. It's walls were of inlaid mahogany and two Japanese prints hung on one of them. Opposite the prints a door with a brass knob the size of a cantaloupe

had been cut in the mahogany. A large curtained window overlooking Mission Street was flanked by mauve drapes. The window was closed and the room was stuffy. A desk to match the woodwork, a leather couch and four, soft leather chairs stood on a red frieze carpet.

A slight, pasty faced man with bald head and incongruously bushy eyebrows sat behind the desk. He watched me through small gray agates.

"Mr. Booker?"

He said, "Yes," in a weak voice that matched his chin.

I took a card from my billfold and handed it to him. "Mrs. Donaldson asked me to make inquiries about her former husband."

He read the card, stood up as if it hurt and reached for my hand. I gave it to him and he tried pumping it a few times, until the weight became too much for him. "Sit down, sit down," he said, waving at one of the soft leather chairs. "I'm glad you came by, most glad. I've been worrying about Robert. Where is he, why has he gone, was there an accident . . . ?" He sank into the chair and ran a hand over his forehead, up through the hair he once had. "We're filling in as best we can, but it can't last much longer. Two weeks already."

"When did you last hear from him, Mr. Booker?"

"Let's see." He riffled through the pages of a desk calendar and sighed deeply after the strenuous exercise. He said, "Two weeks ago last Wednesday, September twenty-ninth. Robert made an early call in Crescent City. That's the last I've heard."

"Has he ever been away like this before?"

"No. A day or two, once in a great while, but he always phoned in."

"What happened to his car after the Crescent City call? Does he use a company car?"

"His own car. He's on mileage and expenses." Booker talked in a cracked hollow monotone, the echo of a distant grave.

"Can you think of any reason he might want to leave, to disappear?" I asked.

"Not one. He's a good, well liked salesman, works our best northern California accounts. He's been with us seven years." He paused, gathering strength to register amazement. "Why, he has over two thousand dollars in our credit union."

"Have you noticed any changes in Donaldson since he's worked for you?"

"Oh, yes." The filmy eyes opened wide and fastened vacantly on my necktie. I don't know how the guy lived through the Fourth of July. "Robert started here as a stock clerk after the war," he droned. "He became floorman, then salesman. He's gone up and up."

"I mean personally, especially during the past months, was there anything different about him?"

"No. I can't think of anything." He began worrying his mythical hair again.

"Could you give me an idea about what he's been doing for the company lately? I suppose you keep records."

"Yes. The records I can show you," Booker said. He pushed himself out of the chair and went to the door, spoke to his secretary. I lit a cigarette and dropped the match in his desk tray, a large polished seashell. Booker returned to his chair with a large Manila folder. He opened it and inspected the contents.

"These are Robert's expense sheets up through Friday, September twenty-fourth." He handed me the folder. "I can bring you up to date. On the following Monday, he worked here in the office until about ten, and left for Eureka. He made some calls going north and he was in Eureka on Tuesday, we've received his orders. He must have gone directly to Crescent City from there and spent the night. His call in Crescent City next morning was before nine o'clock, and that's a half day's drive from Eureka."

There were ten long pink sheets in the folder, one for each month, with the dates printed on the left, remarks and figures opposite most of them. Clipped to each of the pages were hotel and motel receipts.

"When Robert is on the road," Booker explained, "he usually heads north through Tasco, over to Chico, down through Sacramento, to Oakland and home. Seven or eight times a year he extends the trip to cover the smaller, hard to get at areas. He takes in the territory up to Crescent City one time and Alturas, on the other side of the state, the next."

Booker took an almost deep breath, the recitation sapping his strength. He continued, "Opposite the dates on those sheets are his expenses for meals and lodging. Receipts for the lodgings are attached at the top." He paused again and I snuffed out my cigarette in his pretty ashtray. "At the bottom you'll find the upkeep and mileage records for his car. Pull your chair over to the desk and look them over."

I did this and studied each page briefly while Booker leaned back in his chair and watched me through half closed eyes. The records were all neatly typed, and signed by Robert Donaldson. The hotel bills were from pretty much the same sources, except that during the past six months Donaldson had passed up the Saint George Hotel in Tasco, where he stayed earlier in the year, for Casper's Cozy Corner in Gravenstein, a small town south of Tasco.

I asked Booker, "Is there any particular reason why one of your salesmen would prefer one hotel or auto court to another? As a matter of policy, I mean."

"No. Getting the job done is the important thing. They are allowed six dollars a day for accommodations. They can stop wherever they choose."

I thumbed through the records again. Donaldson's practice seemed to be as Booker described it, to arrive in Crescent City in the evening and work it fresh the next morning, then head back toward San Francisco. I found the make and year of his car at the bottom of one of the sheets and memorized the license number.

I closed the folder and placed it in front of him. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Booker."

"Not at all," he said. "Good luck." He pressed a buzzer on his desk and his secretary led me out of the glass maze.

I walked half a block to a bar and used their pay phone to call the office. Jack Holland was waiting for me. Jack is a retired San Francisco cop with a private investigator's license. When the horses are running he works for the security police at the bay area race tracks, and when they aren't I have first call on his services.

"You were lucky to catch me," Jack's voice boomed over the phone. "I was just about to kill a guy who talked me off a winner at Jamaica this morning. You saved his life."

"Did Hilda tell you the deal?"

"Yeah. You're mixed up with another good looking broad. When I was younger . . ."

I interrupted, "Check on her old man's car, Jack. It's a fifty-two, blue Plymouth sedan." I gave him the license number. My wrist watch read ten minutes past four. Before hanging up I asked Jack to get a line on Donaldson through Missing Persons if he had time today."

The phone call gave me an excuse to drink a couple of bourbons in the bar, then I walked back to my heap. The parking meter whipped to violation as I stepped on the starter.

## THREE

Donaldson's apartment was in a tall, wide cream brick building at the foot of Van Ness Avenue overlooking Aquatic Park. I rang the Manager's bell, pushed the wide glass door open when an answering buzzer sounded and walked through an immaculate tile floored, mirror walled lobby. I decided business must be good with Mayflower Shirts.

A big gray haired, rosy faced man was standing in the doorway of apartment 1A. He was holding a newspaper in one hand, gazing at me quizzically over the top rims of thick lensed glasses which sat on the end of his nose. When I gave him one of my cards he adjusted the glasses and squinted at it. I liked the smell of the food cooking behind him.

"Anybody can carry these," he told me, handing back the card.

I pulled out my billfold, showed the photostats of my credentials.

He inspected them carefully and grinned at me. "I'll be darned," he said. "What have we got, adultery in the house?"

"I'm making inquiries about Robert Donaldson in apartment 24," I said. "His office hasn't heard from him since the end of last month. I thought you might give me a line on him."

The gray haired man, large and hard but probably pushing seventy, nodded his head. "Sweeney, eh? My name's Paddy McGonnigle. Come on in."

We went inside and he left me alone in a small, modestly furnished room. The easy chairs and the davenport looked too comfortable to sit in for only a few minutes. I took a straight backed wooden chair at the desk in the corner. Hanging on the wall was a large picture of a heavily muscled athlete in the act of throwing a sledge.

"That's me," McGonnigle said proudly, returning with two tumblers and a bottle of John Jameson's. "Greatest hammer-thrower in the state at one time, the darlin' of the old Cork picnics." He filled the tumblers and handed me one. "Cheers."

My eyes burned after a swallow of the whisky but it felt fine. I'd liked to have heard about the Cork picnics. Instead, I asked him what he knew about Donaldson.

"He seems like a fine lad," McGonnigle said. "He's been here almost two years, the lease is up in December. He's not around much, bein' on the road most of the time." He took another sip of Jameson's and thought about it. "Donaldson's been no trouble a' tall, not so much as a broken light switch. I'm genuinely sorry to hear he hasn't shown up for work."

"Could I have a look at his room?"

McGonnigle squinted doubtfully through the thick lenses. "I don't think I could be allowing that," he said, regretfully. Then his face brightened and he came over to the desk. I moved out of the way while he opened it and rummaged. The glass was still in my hand, so I finished the drink.

"Here's his mail." McGonnigle handed me some magazines and a half dozen envelopes. He took my glass.

The only interesting piece of mail was an envelope stamped with the Marin County Sheriff's Office return address, postmarked this month. I put the stuff back in the desk. When I turned McGonnigle handed me another stick of dynamite.

"Cheers," I said. The athlete on the wall stared at me. "I went to a few Cork picnics myself when I was a kid," I said. "At California Park. I probably saw you in action."

"You were born here, I suppose?" When I nodded the old man wrinkled his forehead and rubbed

a big hand over his face. "Sweeney, Sweeney," he mused. "I should know your father. Not from out the Avenues?"

"No. I was raised in the Mission."

"Ah, the Mission. There's the climate for you," McGonnigle commented. "What line of work is your father in?"

"He was a hod carrier," I said. "He died when I was twelve." I gulped down the drink and stood up.

McGonnigle arose with a sigh. He took my glass and put it on the desk top. "Come on, then," he said. "Rules were made for exceptions. We'll go up and see twenty-four."

I followed him outside to the elevator, where a woman with a shopping bag was just getting in. McGonnigle greeted her with, "Good evening, Mrs. Granucci."

"Evening, Paddy." The woman with the shopping bag sniffed the Jameson's and smiled pleasantly. As the elevator moved she added, "Could I see you for a few minutes before my husband comes home, Paddy? It's about the tile in the bathroom."

"I'll be right down as soon as I'm through with this gentleman, Mrs. Granucci." When the woman got out at five, McGonnigle whispered, "The place is full of Eyetalians."

Donaldson had a two room apartment on the sixth floor, living room, bedroom, kitchenette and bath. A chaise longue, a lounge chair, a chestnut table with four chairs to match, and a writing desk stood on a blue broadloom carpet in the living room. The bedroom contained a double bed, night table, two chairs and a tall bureau. There was little to indicate Donaldson's individuality except that it was neat and slightly dusty.

McGonnigle grew tired of following me around and said, "I'll go tend to Mrs. Granucci, if you don't mind."

I didn't mind. We shook hands. I thanked him for the drinks and he told me to drop by anytime. He walked spryly out of the room, jangling the ring of keys he had used to get us inside.

A more thorough search of the room yielded rent receipts, some minor unpaid bills, a bank book with a small balance and miscellaneous odds and ends. I was most impressed by the photograph of a girl on the bedroom bureau. She was a knockout. She had red hair falling loosely to her bare shoulders and there was light and humor in clear blue eyes. It was a colored full face portrait, the kind you find tacked up on any barracks wall. I unhooked the frame and slipped out the picture. The imprint on back read: Artcraft Studios, 26 Acacia Road, Gravenstein, Calif. I replaced it in the frame.

It was almost five o'clock. I went into the living room and used Donaldson's phone to call my office.

"Jack phoned," Hilda told me.

"Donaldson's car was towed away from the bus depot in Marin City ten days ago. The sheriff's office is holding it as presumably abandoned since it hasn't been reported stolen."

"How long before it was towed away?"

"The cops tagged it first on the morning of the thirtieth, but Jack says it could have been parked there the night before. It's an illegal parking zone in the daytime."

"Good. Where is Jack?"

"He's home. He says he'll wait until the night man comes on at the Hall before he checks with the police. A friend of his." I could hear Hilda shuffling papers, checking to see if she'd missed anything. "That's all," she said. "How are things?"

"Fine. I think Jack saved me a trip to Crescent City."

Hilda said something more but a staccato knock sounded on the apartment door, muffling her voice. I said "Goodbye" into the phone and hung up.

"I hear you in there," a jet haired almond skinned pantheress was shouting as I opened the door. Her right fist missed its target and punched me on the chest. She pushed me aside with the fist and stormed into the room, swung around and stood, hands on hips, glaring at me. The fire in her long lashed dark eyes dissolved slowly into wonder. She said, "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Sweeney."

This information didn't seem to help. She turned abruptly and began a search of the apartment, a boxlike handbag hanging from a shoulder strap bouncing against her slim hips as she glided from kitchen to bathroom to bedroom. An organdy white dress she wore didn't show a wrinkle to mar her graceful Latin movements.

After the closets, she gave up. She came back to the living room and sat on the chaise-longue. I took the chair opposite and offered my pack of cigarettes. We each took one and I lit them. She leaned back, showing how wrong Dior can be, and looked at me steadily through the curling smoke.

"Where is he?" she asked in a mildly husky voice with a dash of Spanish accent.

"Donaldson?"

"Whom do you think I mean? He lives here, does he not?"

"I don't know where Donaldson is. I'm looking for him myself." When she didn't believe me, I added, "My name is Bill Sweeney, I'm a private investigator. You can check with my office if you like."

She took a deep drag on her cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly through magenta lips. She half smiled at me and said, "I will take your word for it, Bill. I am Eve Bustamente. I live next door and Bob is the good friend of mine. As I am coming home just now I heard you moving around, and I thought I heard voices . . ."

"I was using the phone."

Eve Bustamente glanced at the phone absently and nodded. "Bob and I are quite the good friends," she said, meeting my eyes. "We had the slight quarrel last month. I have not seen him since." She snubbed her cigarette in the ash stand next to her. "Now, you tell me. What is it all about?"

"Donaldson is missing. He hasn't checked in with his employers for the past couple of weeks. No one seems to know where he is?"

"And I think he is avoiding me," she said, crinkling the corners of her mouth.

"He's also behind in his alimony payments and his wife wants him found."

"Wife." Eve Bustamente was on her feet, eyes blazing like flamethrowers again. "He never had the wife. Who told you that lie?"

"Mrs. Donaldson was in to see me this afternoon."

"Ha. That thing in there on his dresser, I will bet you. Is that who is saying she was married to him?"

"No, I saw the picture. She isn't the same woman." I put out my cigarette and sat back, watching her pace the floor. She was puzzled and angry, and uncertain what to do about it.

"He was not married," Eve Bustamente said, sitting down again. She leaned toward me. "I have known Bob for a long time, very well. He got this apartment through me when the old tenants moved out. We are very close. He told me he was not married. I believe him."

I let that drop and asked her why Donaldson should disappear.

"I cannot say. Last time we are together we are as always. Except we have the fight, the small argument, about that one in there," she waved impatiently at the bedroom. "We understand these things," she shrugged. "But I cannot stand her watching us."

"Who is the girl?"

"Bob says she is his sister in Peoria." Eve Bustamente's anger melted into a mischievious grin. She added, "About that he lies."

"How long has the picture been there?"

"I do not know, a few months perhaps."

We had another cigarette and more conversaion that didn't lead anywhere. Finally we left the apartment and I walked to the door of twenty-five with her.

"Will you come in for a drink?" she asked in a new voice that was nothing to do with Robert Donaldson.

"No, thanks. I have some things to do."

"I hope you will find Bob, but I am not worried. He can manage himself. About the one who pretends she is his wife, I do not know." She fitted her key in the lock, opened the door and turned to me smiling. "I have the hot temper sometimes. Today, it was because I think Bob is standing me

up all this time. Come see me again and I will be nicer."

I said I would and meant it.

Outside, it was sunny with a light breeze whistling in from the bay. It was hot as a stove in the heap. I rolled down both windows, made a U-turn and drove up Van Ness Avenue. In the rear view mirror I noticed a green Buick sedan with New Jersey plates perform the same illegal operation.

Later, as I nursed my '37 Chevvy along the outside lane of the approach to Golden Gate bridge, the Buick bobbed and weaved in the traffic behind me.

## FOUR

Spanking winds on the bridge cooled the effects of Eve Bustamente and John Jameson. On the other side of the bay, short of Millbrae, I turned off the highway into Mario's Grotto and parked. I went into Mario's and ate a big fat lobster at the bar.

When I returned to the heap the green Buick was crouching at the far end of the parking lot, a thin cloud curling from its exhaust. Two men in gray hats, too far away for identification, were sitting in it. I maneuvered the Chevvy to the top of the exit driveway and waited for a break.

There is a continuous flux of speeding, hell for rubber motorists hurtling to and from San Francisco at this time of night. I plunged into the first opening they gave me, closed the gap on the car ahead and stayed in the center lane. The Buick was left at the gate.

At Millbrae I cut off the highway and slowed to twenty-five, hugging the shoulder, giving the men in the Buick plenty of time to catch me if they'd seen me turn. When they didn't show by San Anselmo, I drove back to the highway through San Rafael and continued north. It cost me half an hour.

Gravenstein, located in a pocket of Geronimo County twenty miles South of Tasco, the county seat, is a fine town for chickens and people over sixty-five. The main street, about three city blocks long, is bisected by Russia avenue, the main thoroughfare to the resorts on nearby Geronimo River. The town, which prides itself in low taxes, due to the heavy fines levied on summer people who overpark in it, or speed through it, or get drunk in it on their way to the resorts, was asleep when I passed through at eight o'clock. A sign on the door of Artcraft Studios said: Open 8:00 A.M.

In the outskirts of Gravenstein a billboard with a paint chipped shingle hanging under it announced Casper's Cozy Corner, Vacancy. It pointed at a horseshoe of square, flat cabins. I stopped at the first one, labeled Office. A scrawny, beak nosed woman with bones poking holes in her faded print dress was waiting for me on the porch. She

showed me a mouthful of brown and silver, introduced herself as Mrs. Casper.

I registered, took the key and drove over to cabin number ten. Mrs. Casper watched from a curtained office window as I unlocked the turtleback and took out a traveling bag. The bag contained shaving gear and a fifth of Old Taylor. I took it into the cabin and used the contents.

Mrs. Casper wasn't around when I stopped by on my way out. There were two camp stools on the porch. A copy of the *Gravenstein Mail* lay on one of them and enough light was reflected from the sunken sun to read it. I picked it up and sat down. The *Mail* was a three sheet weekly which reported the price of poultry, hops and apples, along with the news that the Hiram Slacks had done it again. There weren't any after dark ads.

The screen door banged and Mrs. Casper stood looking down at me. "Was there something else?"

"I've decided to pay in advance, Mrs. Casper," I said. "I may be leaving early in the morning."

"All right, that'll be four and a half," she told me. "Stay right there and I'll make out a receipt."

I threw the newspaper on the other camp stool, stood up and leaned against the porch railing. In the distance, over the tops of the redwood trees, under a fading silver and orange sky, green peaks wore opalescent halos.

"Doesn't seem to be much doing," I remarked, paying Mrs. Casper for the receipt. "I appear to be your only guest."

"Well, the season's officially over now. Columbus Day ends it, you know." She dropped into a camp chair with an accordian sound. "But the weather's been good and they're still drawing middlin' crowds on the river. Too early in the week end for us to get the overflow yet."

"I should have stayed in Tasco, I guess, since I'm going north in the morning. But a friend of mine recommended your place, said it was nice and clean and quiet. He's right." When Mrs. Casper brightened I added, "Robert Donaldson told me about it. Know him?"

"I should say," she cackled. "Mr. Donaldson stays here quite often, spring and summer. Seldom a month goes by he don't visit with us." Mrs. Casper leaned toward me and spoke in a stern, confidential whisper, "Though heaven only knows what he wants a room for. His bed ain't slept in half the time."

I left Mrs. Casper on the porch, went back to the heap and headed out Russia avenue toward Geronimo River. After ten miles of corkscrew, climbing roads I was in Avonella, the hub of the resort section. I checked the hotel and a couple of clubs here, then drove out of town, following the river road. Three roadside joints later I found what I was looking for.

The Rio cabana, a small circular structure with a low thatched roof, squatted in a cluster of redwoods a few hundred feet off the highway. A neon sign in the center of the parking lot in front blinked its name, and the canvas banner below it advertised Doris Dawn at the piano. A showcase next to the door held an enlargement of the photograph on Donaldson's bedroom bureau.

It was an intimate saloon, dimly lighted. To the left of the entrance there was a bar, an alcove at the end of it bearing the legend Rest Rooms, Telephone. On the right was a large room, wicker tables and chairs crowded around a Baldwin in the center of the floor. Three men and a woman stood at the bar, four couples sat at four different tables, a gum chewing waitress slouched against the far wall. The bartender, in a loud Hawaiian sport shirt, wiped the bar in front of me with a damp towel.

I ordered bourbon and soda and walked through the arch to the telephone booth. I looked for Doris Dawn's name under all the towns listed in the thin directory. She wasn't in any of them.

When I returned to the bar Doris Dawn was at the piano. She played well, looked better and was prettier than her picture. She wore a strapless green evening dress and her swirling red hair caught and hurled bright javelins from a floor spotlight as she played.

The bartender hovered. I gave him a dollar bill. He rang it up and brought back a quarter. I pushed it back at him. "I'd like to hear 'If you can't leave it alone, take it'," I said. "And do you think the lady will have a drink with me?"

"She sure will," he said emphatically. He flipped the quarter into a glass on the back bar and signalled the waitress. She came off the wall like the rebound in handball.

I carried my drink to a table and sat down. The waitress had a few words with the bartender and walked to the piano. As she talked the redhead glanced at me indifferently. The waitress kept talking. She must have been saying: So business is lousy, what the hell, let him buy you a drink. The redhead played my request.

After two more numbers Doris Dawn joined me. I thanked her for coming. She thanked me for asking her. The waitress arrived with another highball for me, a long stemmed glass of pink tea for the redhead. She gave me two dollars back for a pedro and looked surprised when I tipped her without argument.

"It's my first trip to the river this year," I said. "Looks like I missed the crowds."

"Yes," Doris Dawn said listlessly. Unlike her photograph, this girl's eyes were lifeless, her face slightly drawn. She was worried about something and I wasn't at the table at all.

"Do you play here all year round, or just during the summer?" I asked.

"All year except January and February," she said. "We're one of the few places that stay open." She started to sip her drink, but put it down quickly.

"Could I order you something else? I'm up here alone, just feel like talking to somebody. My wife understands me and I have no troubles."

She forgot she was worried about something and felt me with her eyes. The babes this Donaldson latched on to. She said, "Whatever you're drinking."

When the waitress brought a new bourbon Doris Dawn took a deep swallow of it and smiled at me. "When we're busy all I do is play the piano," she explained. "In the off season I drink this other swill with any two-bit jerk who can afford it."

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry," she laughed musically. "I wouldn't have switched if you were in that bracket." The lights were in her eyes now and she was smiling with good white teeth.

"Where did you ever get a moniker like Doris Dawn?" I asked. "With that hair and those eyes it ought to be Murphy, or O'Toole."

She continued to smile. "As a matter of fact it's Doris O'Rourke. I used to play the night club circuit and my own name was death in the ads, so they told me."

"Then you gave up the big cities for the peace and quiet of Geronimo River."

Her smile disappeared, the lights went out and her preoccupied mood returned. "That was the idea," she said passively.

We worked on our drinks a few more minutes, until she excused herself and went to the piano. I went back to the phone directory. This time I found it: O'Rourke, Dorothy, One Rosebud lane. A map at the front of the book showed me how to get there.

## FIVE

A bright half moon helped me find Rosebud lane, a paved narrow stretch which shot off an artery of the main road and wound up the side of a hill. Number one was a fenceless cottage behind a narrow square of lawn, with a driveway and one car garage, at the foot of the hill. There was a night light burning over its door, but no signs of life. I passed the cottage, climbing the road behind it in low gear. The night was still as Tut's tomb.

I had to go all the way to the summit to turn around. My headlights picked up a flurry of arms and legs, scaring the bejabbers out of a couple in the back seat of a parked car there. Coming down, the sudden flush of a toilet sounded like a dam breaking in the quiet, and I saw a thin sliver of light flash at the rear of Number one.

At the foot of the hill I turned into the driveway of the cottage and parked, went up to the door and pressed the bell. Musical chimes made an obscene noise in the stillness. When no one answered, I pressed again. And again.

The door opened a foot, disclosing nothing. A tight, hard voice said, "I've got a 'forty-five trained on your guts, buddy. Step inside, and when you're in put your hands up."

I followed instructions and the door slammed behind me. It was completely dark inside. The voice told me to turn around and face the door. I did, there was a sharp click and the room filled with light. From behind he frisked me with his left hand, prodding my kidneys with the nose of the 'forty-five in his right.

As he unbuttoned my left hip pocket and dug for my wallet I spun quickly, hammering my right fist down on his gun wrist. The 'forty-five thumped to the floor and I hit him hard on the side of his head with a left. He staggered back and I caught him flush on the chin with a right hand, sending him across the room. He tripped over a footstool and fell into an armchair in the corner. I retrieved the gun and held it on him.

"Stay in the chair, Donaldson." I took out my wallet and threw it at him. He shook his head, glared at me when his eyes focused and began to examine the contents of the wallet. I seated myself in a curved sectional sofa in the center of the room, facing him.

Robert Donaldson was about thirty five, slightly under six feet tall, with plenty of well placed meat on him. He had wavy dark brown hair, cobalt blue eyes and sharp dark skinned features. His lips were set in a grim line as he studied my credentials.

"So what?" Donaldson flipped the wallet to me. "Have they figured a legal way to murder me?"

"Has who?"

Donaldson laughed flatly. "Don't you know? Are we going to play games?" He took a cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket and lit it. He frowned angrily at the 'forty-five in my hand, then his expression changed to perplexity. He asked, "Why aren't you carrying a gun?"

"Your ex-wife hired me to find you, Donaldson. I had no reason to think a weapon was necessary." I placed the gun on the sofa. "Is beating alimony this important?"

He sat there smoking for a minute, his forehead resolving into three deep lines. He said, "I expected you, or someone like you, to walk in here and put a bullet between my eyes. I didn't expect a song and dance to go with it." His eyes locked mine. "I'll go along with you, what more can I lose? You say my ex-wife hired you. I don't have any. I've never been married."

"Someone else told me that today, but she was prejudiced."

Donaldson's face lighted and he smiled for the first time. "You talked to Eve."

"Yes, quite a girl." I picked up the gun and handed it to him. "A Mrs. Anne Donaldson gave me a retainer of two hundred and fifty dollars. The large fee in advance plus the fact that a couple of hoods tried to tail me this evening makes me wonder. Maybe there are people looking for you who can't come out in the open about it."

"They're looking for me all right, looking real hard." Donaldson held the gun tentatively, as if wondering why he had it, then placed it on a magazine stand beside his chair.

"What's the trouble," I said, "maybe I can help. I don't like being shoved in the middle like this. You think someone is trying to kill you. If that's true and it happens I'll be next, since I'm the only one who can point a finger."

Donaldson had been watching me speculatively, panning my words and appearance, weighing the result on his personal scale of truth. "I've got to tell somebody," he said decisively. "I'm in an absolutely hell of a shape and I don't know where to turn. I never felt so helpless in my life." He got up and began stamping the floor in front of me. He lit another cigarette off the butt of the one he was smoking and threw the butt into an ashtray. He complained, "And all on account of a lousy box of candy."

"Now and then, just before a holiday," Donaldson began. "My boss gives me six or seven boxes of candy to deliver to a list of customers. The holidays are never the same ones, they can be anything from Easter Sunday to Election Day. Sometimes he thinks one up you never heard of, like Confederate Memorial Day. I used to figure the old duffer was off his rocker, but the gifts of the candy didn't hurt my calls any so why worry about them."

"Booker is your boss?"

He nodded. "Ralph Booker, my great and good friend. The last time I was in the office he told me he'd forgotten about Admission Day, but I could pick up the boxes of candy and distribute them before Columbus Day, suiting both occasions."

"At Bassey's Confectionery in North Beach. They're supposed to make wonderful candy. I haven't thought twice about the place until this last trip." Donaldson sat in the armchair again. "The customers who get the candy vary for the most part. Once it will be Otham's in Santa Rosa, another time it'll be Grundy's in Ukiah. But two stores are always on Booker's list, the Pennant Shirt Shops in Tasco and Eureka." When I didn't register this news properly he enlarged, "Pennant is a Sacramento chain with stores in California, Oregon and

Nevada. They're Mayflower's biggest customers."

"So their store managers are always entitled to the holiday gift."

"That's what I figured," Donaldson said wryly. "When I picked up the candy each box was always tied with a ribbon. Two of them are tied with black ribbons, the rest with pink."

"The black ribbons go to Pennant Shops," I prompted as he paused to extinguish his cigarette.

"Yeah. And they're full of hop."

I dragged on my cigarette and blew out the smoke. Two and two was making a nasty four. I said, "Mayower Shirts is a narcotic dealer?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. Mayflower, Booker or Bassey's, or all three. Take your pick."

"How often do you make these deliveries?"

"This was my fourth this year. Before, there was Washington's Birthday, Easter and Decoration Day," Donaldson said. "It's been happening six or seven times a year."

"That means a lot of money to someone. How large are the boxes?"

"Two pound boxes of assorted chocolates," he said sourly. "On my way to Eurkea on this last trip I dropped one off at Otham's in Santa Rosa. By mistake, I gave him a black ribboned box. Later I was having a cup of coffee next door when old Tom Otham came in and showed me the candy. He had bitten into two pieces and the insides looked like unmelted sugar in a kind of hard paper wrapping. I apologized and told him I'd take it back to the factory."

"Was it horse?"

"I'm coming to that," Donaldson said impatiently. "I still didn't catch on, why should I? Bassey's manufactures plenty of candy, probably they turn out a faulty batch once in awhile. I continued to deliver the rest of it, including a black ribboned box in Tasco. Next day in Eureka I gave Norton, at the Pennant store, a box with a pink ribbon. He caught up with me the following morning in Crescent City and demanded the other box. I explained that the regular box was defective and described what happened at Otham's, but he told me it was a special type of Greek candy you can only get at Bassey's. He insisted I give him the box, complete with the pieces Otham bit into."

"The Greeks get blamed for everything," I commented.

"On the way home from Crescent City I was almost killed twice on the highway," Donaldson grimaced at the thought. "First, I hardly noticed it. A joker between Scotia and Garberville kept ahead of me on the straightaways, slowing down on the turns so it looked like I could pass him. I tired passing twice, and each time he speeded up. If a car had come the other way I'd

have been a goner." He lit another cigarette. "The second time was outside Ukiah. A logging truck forced me to the edge of a cliff when no other cars were in sight. I stopped cold, the truck almost went over instead, and I got the hell away from there fast." Donaldson wiped a rivulet of perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I began wondering then," he continued. "The inside of the candy I delivered to Otham looked like sugar, but that was just a comparison. It wasn't sugar, was more powdery, and what was it doing sealed in transparent paper? I was thinking it was white as snow under the wrapper, and then I had it: heroin. It seems unbelievable that all these years I've been transporting heroin in candy boxes for that silly boob Booker, but there's no other solution."

"If that was pure heroin," I said. "Something less than two pounds in each of the two boxes is worth more than ten thousand dollars wholesale in the foreign market. Here, properly cut with sugar of milk, ten times that. Four deliveries come close to a potential million bucks."

Donaldson got up and left the room. He returned with a bottle of Scotch and two water glasses. He poured two fingers in each glass and handed me one.

"What happened after Ukiah?" I asked.

"Well, I was scared and I pushed the Plymouth as fast as it would move. I was in San Rafael before I could think straight. I realized I wasn't being followed and had better make some plans. San Francisco was out, I knew. They'd be waiting for me on the other side of the bridge. I thought of Doris and I was sure she'd take me in. At Marin City I parked the car and took a bus up here. I haven't stepped outside the door since."

"Have you told Doris?"

"Part of it."

We sipped the drinks. The Scotch was warm and powerful. I took out the picture of Donaldson in his corporal's uniform and handed it to him. "Ever see this?"

He stared at it and said, "Damned if I have."

"It's you."

He nodded, concentrating on the snapshot.

"The alleged Mrs. Anne Donaldson gave it to me," I said. I described my client, but he denied any knowledge of her. I asked, "Were you ever in San Francisco in uniform?"

"When we were at Stoneman before going overseas," he remembered. "I had one forty-eight hour pass." He added, "Come to think, I'd just got the stripes."

"This could have been taken then."

"Yes, but you know how it is. They're forever taking your picture in those gin mills in the city.

You're a cheap tool to the girl you're with if you don't buy her one. It happens in any city, anywhere. You forget the picture, the bar, the night club, the girl. It's something you do on leave, that's all."

"True, but this is a fairly fresh photograph, must have been developed recently from a negative in the files of some night club. Try and remember where you spent that leave."

"Mason, Powell, Turk, Eddy, Ellis, O'Farrell streets," Donaldson recalled, smiling. "Joints I wouldn't be caught in now."

"How about a place you were in during leave and after the war both?"

Donaldson studied the snapshot soberly. "The Green Slipper," he said. "That's it, The Green Slipper on Broadway. Eve and I have been there. I recognize the upholstery now. Whoever the girl was, she's been cut out of the picture."

We finished our drinks and Donaldson poured more Scotch in the glasses. He sat back, relaxed. "I feel good, telling you this, getting it off my chest." He grinned. "I'm glad I didn't shoot you."

"Why didn't you call a cop in the first place?"

"How could I?" He waved his arm in the air. "The candy's gone, and I can't prove anyone tried to kill me."

"Does Miss O'Rourke have a car?"

"Yes."

"Phone and get her out here," I told him. "The two of you get in her car and get the hell away from here. You know Max Wendell's farm in Moraga?"

"The fight camp? Yes, but . . ."

"Tell Max I sent you. He'll put you up."

"What about Doris? She has her job."

"Get serious, Donaldson. I found this place and whoever wants to find you isn't far behind. If they miss you, they'll go to work on your girl friend."

Donaldson swallowed a big chunk of nothing and went to the phone. When he was through talking to the Rio Cabana he asked, "What're you going to do?"

I grinned at him. "Do you want to hire a private detective?"

He rubbed his chin reflectively, said, "All right." His lips worked into the reckless smile of his snapshot and he added, "You can't collect from a dead man."

I finished my drink and stood up. "You'll be safe with Max," I said. "Take the gun with you." We shook hands. He left the lights on as he let me out.

Parked in the shadows up the road I watched Doris O'Rourke arrive. Donaldson had evidently packed a bag for her, since they didn't waste any time leaving the cottage. I followed them to the main highway, then drove back to Casper's Cozy Corner and hit the sack.

## SIX

It was cool and foggy when I left the auto court early next morning. I drove to San Francisco with the windows up and the headlights on, arrived at my office shortly after ten o'clock. Hilda and Jack Holland were waiting.

"A Miss Bustamente phoned," Hilda informed me. "She wants you to call her."

"Good." I sat behind the desk. Jack was planked on the edge of it.

"I told you about the Plymouth already," Jack said. "Last night I checked with the department. They have no record of a missing Robert Donaldson. No one has inquried about him at all, and they've never heard of Mrs. Donaldson."

"Donaldson hasn't either." I grabbed the phone and called the Westshire. Mrs. Donaldson checked out half an hour ago, they told me. No, there was no forwarding address.

"The phantom client," Jack scowled. He pulled an Optimo out of his lapel pocket and unravelled it. As he lit the cigar, Hilda reached behind me and lifted the window to the limit.

"I talked to Donaldson last night," I related. "We're on his side now, for the moment anyhow." Jack sat cross legged, puffing his cigar, and Hilda stood attentively, leaning her elbow on the filing cabinet, while I briefed them.

"A dope ring," Jack slapped his thigh vehemently. "Man, how I'd like to put the kibosh on those skunks."

Hilda asked, "Why use a man like Donaldson in an operation like this? He could blow up the whole thing, without knowing it."

"That's the beauty of it, from their standpoint," I reasoned. "Donaldson not only cuts down the overhead, he won't shoot off his mouth because he doesn't know what he's doing. And he's a legitimate salesman with a compatible income, not a man with a record who might draw suspicion making deliveries."

"My. They are clever," Hilda commented.

"He must have been carrying virgin horse," Jack suggested. "They pack it in some special paper, pour chocolate over it and freeze it so it looks like the McCoy. In Tasco and Eureka they cut the stuff and whatever they don't peddle directly they can ship over through Nevada, or up the coast to Portland, and points North."

"Pennant Shirt Shops has outlets either way."

We chewed it over. They agreed that Eureka Investigations was apparently the pivotal point in a sucker play.

"You drop by the Westshire and get a line on Mrs. Donaldson, Jack," I said. "I'll see Miss Bustamente. We'll meet here, or phone Hilda if we get anything hot."

The fog had lifted. It was warm and brilliant as I drove out Van

Ness avenue. Eve Bustamente, in a cerise towel housecoat, was hopping mad when she admitted me to her apartment.

"They slugged me," she shouted, her dark eyes blazing, her black hair tossing like the mane of a wild horse, "Right behind the ear. If I can for one minute only get my hands on them I will teach them good." She bucked up and down the living room, the housecoat billowing around her knees, waving her arms in windmill swings. I asked her to calm down and tell me about it.

"It was before eight o'clock, what a time to housebreak. I was leaving for work—I am a designer, but now I am not good for the work today, they make me so ma-ad. I pass by Robert's room and I hear the noise. It seems I am always hearing the noises in there. The lock on the door is broken and I push it open. This man is looking through the drawers and closets, such a mess. I go to him and say 'what are you doing?' Bang. I am slugged on the back of the head. I am like a light, out. What a headache I have."

"Did the men take anything?"

"I do not know. The police came and they said they could not know if anything was stolen unless the owner will tell them." Eve made fists of her small hands, glowered angrily like a teased kitten. "Sit down," she huffed at me. "You are grinning like the big ape."

"I think you're most beautiful when you're angry," I said, sitting at the end of a long tufted sofa.

"Ah?" Eve smiled pleasantly, the storm had passed. "Let us look at his room. The door is not fixed yet."

I followed her into the hall. The door of Donaldson's apartment had been clumsily jimmied. Inside drawers from the bureau and writing desk had been carelessly upended. The picture of Doris O'Rourke was gone from the bedroom and the frame which held it lay broken on the floor. That was all they needed.

We returned to Eve's apartment. I resumed my seat and asked, "Can you describe the man you saw in there?"

"It was very quick," she said. "He was ugly, short and wide and ugly. He wore a gray hat and suit. He wore the pink sport shirt. Pink." Eve's eyes widened in amazement. "He had a mean ugly face, I can not think of any more."

"That's fine."

"Now I will fix a drink. I have had already at least one." She turned and left the room through a swinging door, the housecoat swishing sibilantly. She returned with two aperitif glasses of rum, handed me one and sat beside me. She asked, "Is the drink nice?"

I sipped the rum and said it was fine.

Eve put her glass down on the coffee table in front of us and leaned back against me. My arm re-

ceived orders from somewhere and looped around her. She settled into the hollow of my shoulder, said softly, "I have been through the most harrowing experience. You must comfort me."

"Poor, defenseless creature," I remarked. She laughed, pulling my hand down over her shoulder. She was as fragile as a curled cobra. Warm and soft against me she sent sparkling messages in bedroom cipher. My receiving set was picking them up loud and clear, but hell, Donaldson was in the bite.

"You are thinking of Robert," she said, rubbing my knuckles with her finger tips. "What is it about, this missing business and the breaking in to his room?"

"You were right about his not having a wife, but he is being hunted by someone," I explained. "I'm trying to help him."

"So." She turned and sent a shock into me with those deep, dark eyes. "So, you are going to leave?"

I put my other arm around her then and we kissed, a long, moist kiss. I didn't want to go and I didn't want to stay. Her hand stole inside my coat to my back, then she pushed me away.

"Now you must go," Eve said firmly. "We will see each other again."

I got back to the office before noon. Max Wendell had phoned and everything was okay in Moraga hills. Jack reported on Mrs. Donaldson.

"The lady registered yesterday morning at quarter past eight, giving an Oakland address," Jack said, referring to a piece of Westshire stationery. "According to the phone company the address is a parking lot. She went out, presumably to consult you, in the afternoon and returned at about three o'clock. She ate her meals in the hotel and remained in her room the rest of the time."

"They kept pretty good tabs on her."

"Swanson's the house man over there. He has an eye for a pretty broad. Between him and the desk clerk, Mrs. Donaldson was well guarded." Jack consulted his pencil scratchings. "A skinny, well dressed man with a pock marked face called on her a couple hours ago. She checked out and drove off with him in a cream colored Lincoln. The bellman says the guy looked like somebody he's seen around with Frankie Mortola." Jack handed the notepaper to Hilda and added, "Sounds like Benny Lufts."

"Another name on the roster." I told them about the theft of the photograph from Donaldson's apartment. "I want you to drive to Sacramento this afternoon, Jack, and case Pennant Shirt Shops. Their main office is there, you might find a tie-in with Mayflower. On the way up stop at the Artcraft Studios in Gravenstein. If someone was around there this morning trying to

identify Doris O'Rourke's photograph, call the sheriff's office immediately; report a burglary at number one Rosebud lane and give them the leads from Artcraft and Donaldson's apartment."

"I'll have to fly," Jack growled. He plowed out of the office like an old quarter horse.

Hilda smiled after him. "When he rains, he pours."

"I'm going to stake out our friend Ralph Booker," I told Hilda. "Meanwhile, close up the office, go out and get all the dope on Mayflower Shirts, Bassey's, and a bar on Broadway called the Green Slipper. Try the Herald, State Board, City Hall, everywhere."

Hilda said, "I'll have to fly too, if I'm going to eat lunch."

My watch read ten minutes to twelve. Leaving, I said, "If you get hold of anything phone before you come back. I may be here."

## SEVEN

I parked up the street from the Mayflower buiding and sat, smoking cigarettes and watching the entrance to the upstairs offices, until half past one. There was no sign, going or coming, of Ralph Booker. Maybe he didn't eat lunch.

I went upstairs, past the reproachful girl at the desk, through the maze of frosted glass to Booker's office. The girl in the anteroom stopped typing and raised pencilled eyebrows at me. When I walked by her, into the manager's inner sanctum, she rose hurriedly and followed.

The pasty faced man was drooping in the chair behind his desk, his elbows on the arms, chin reposing on the interlocked fingers of his clay colored hands. He opened the small clouded orbs under his bushy brows and stared at my feet, then rearranged himself so he was sitting upright.

To the girl Booker said, "Why don't you go out for a cup of coffee, Miss Arnold? Have my calls put through the front desk." When the door closed behind her he said, "Well, Mr. Sweeney, won't you be seated?"

I took the chair nearest his desk, lit a cigarette and dropped the match into his polished seashell. His gray agates focused on the match like it was the aftermath of an atomic explosion.

"Where's Mrs. Donaldson, Booker?"

"Has she disappeared too?" He ran a hand over his bald head, breaking the reflection of sun from the curtained window behind him.

"As far as I'm concerned she has, but I think you know where to find her," I said. "You showed no surprise yesterday when I mentioned that Donaldson's former wife had employed me to locate him; but you knew he had never been married. Even if he hadn't mentioned his marriage to you himself, which is improbable, you'd have known

about it from the records of his withholding taxes."

The pasty faced man grabbed the arms of his chair and pushed himself up. He crossed to the side door in the mahogany wall and opened it by the canteloupe knob. Leaving it ajar, he walked impassively back to the chair and slumped into it.

Two men in gray hats came through the door. They had twin builds, short and chunky. One of them wore a blue gabardine suit, the other was dressed in gray. The man in gray wore a pink sport shirt and fitted Eve Bustamente's description of her early morning assailant. He was ugly. They were both ugly, and angry looking with thick bloodless lips itching to snarl. They were two commercial diamonds of the sub-rosa industry.

"Sweeney, eh?" Pink shirt rasped. He turned to Booker, "This guy bothering you, Mr. Booker?"

The pasty faced man didn't look at either of them. He stared listlessly at one of the Japanese prints on the wall. "He thinks I can tell him where Anne, Mrs. Donaldson, has gone."

"Why, Syd and I will be glad to take him to Mrs. Donaldson, won't we Syd?" Pink shirt offered.

The man in blue nodded his bulldog head agreeably. He asked me, "Would you care to accomp'ny Eddie and me to where the skirt is?"

I put out my cigarette and stood up. "Let's go."

The torpedos appeared disappointed. Eddie, in the pink shirt, growled, "You mean you don t need convincin'?"

"I'm convinced," I answered. "I want to see the girl."

Booker was still gazing at the Japanese print as we filed through the side door. We walked down open wooden steps to a parking lot in back of the building. The green Buick was waiting. I got in the front seat, Syd in back.

"Why don't chou save time and kill two birds with one stone, Eddie?," Syd asked his partner when he opened the door on the driver's side.

Eddie laughed hoarsely. "You're thinkin' with your head again," he said. He slammed the car door and walked back toward the steps.

I made it easy for Syd in the rear seat. I leaned back, my head straight up, an appetizing target. Millions of tiny, white hot arrows stabbed me behind the right ear. The glare of the windshield dimmed, the windshield and the dashboard floated into a blue vertical wave that turned inky black and disappeared altogether.

I was watching a key dance crazily at the end of a chain hanging from another key in an ignition switch. Miserable key. It resented the chain and wanted to free itself, I could see that. I reached out the hand I wasn't lying on to rescue the key. A hard rap on the back of my wrist halted me.

"Papa spank," a guttural voice reprimanded.

The sting in my wrist prodded me. I heaved myself into a sitting position and saw the owner of the voice, Eddie in the pink shirt, behind the wheel of a green Buick. We were driving South on Portrero avenue. The light and the speeding traffic hurt my eyes. I blinked away silver gray cobwebs and remembered. The back side of my head felt like a volcano crater looks. It was sore when I touched it.

I squirmed around to face Syd in the rear seat. He sat complacently, his right hand bulging under the left side of his coat. "Why did you do that?" I asked him.

"You needed sleep." Syd showed me how tough he was. He made a fist of his left hand and shoved my face around with it.

We turned off Portrero, drove through Apparel City and over Winston avenue to a four storied white stucco apartment house. Eddie and Syd took me up a self service elevator to the fourth floor. They walked me halfway down a deep carpeted hallway to a door with a diamond shaped mirror at eye level in its center. In a slot over the doorbell alongside the door a neatly engraved card spelled out Mr. Frank Mortola. Eddie pressed the bell.

A grinning thin man with a sallow, rutted complexion admitted us to the apartment. He straightened his thin lips when I said, "Hello, Benny. How've you been?"

I was ushered into a large, high walled room with a fireplace at the far end. A picture window hid behind olive venetian blinds on one side, oriental rugs lay around on brown and white checkerboard tile. There were a couple of ottomans, two sofas, a number of modernistic chairs, stand-up ashtrays and cocktail tables among them. Mortola must have decorated the joint himself.

The girl who hired me to find Robert Donaldson sat in one of the ottomans, an open magazine in her lap. She paled under the tan when our eyes locked for an instant as I came into the room. Frankie Mortola sat on a sofa, smoking a new cigar and seeming pleased to see me. Mortola was an ex-bootlegger, ex-bookie, who was now accepted in some circles, notably petty political ones, as high rolling, good humored Frankie: the rough exterior with the heart of gold. I knew better.

He was a big black haired fat faced man with a flat nose and one and a half ears. His thick black brows were frozen into a perpetual scowl, and when he tried to smile he looked like a pregnant satan. He was trying to smile now.

I walked to the other sofa and sat down, opposite Mortola. I said, "All I need is a drink."

Mortola glanced at Benny Lufts, "Fix Sweeney a drink. And one for me." He leaned forward toward

the girl. "Will you join us?"

"No thank you." Anne Donaldson spoke in a small, strained voice.

"No thank you," Mortola repeated, turning to me. "What's your pleasure, Sweeney?"

"A lot of whisky and a little soda. I've just been sapped and my head hurts."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, looking over my shoulder. "Syd, Eddie. Come over and sit down, next to Sweeney. That's it, one on each side, like for a group picture."

The master having spoken, they performed accordingly. Mortola looked at the tip of his cigar, surprised to learn there was an ash on it. He flicked the ash with his thick little finger and it spattered on the rug. He asked, "Didn't Sweeney want to come with you, Eddie?"

"I was all for it," I interrupted. "I wanted to see Mrs. Donaldson, but when I got in the car with this guy Syd he bashed me on the head. Where'd you import these meatballs from, Mortola? No manners."

Benny Lufts handed drinks to Mortola and me. I gulped half of mine and the sharp, sour taste chased away the remaining traces of mist behind my eyes.

"You mustn't be too impulsive, Syd," Mortola said, feigning displeasure by moving his fat head from side to side. "Where did you hit him?"

On his right, Syd said, "Here," and poked the small lump back of my ear with his fingers.

It hurt like hell and I lost control of myself. I threw what was left of my drink in Syd's face and followed through with the glass in the heel of my hand. The mouth of the tumbler cracked on the bridge of his nose and I kept shoving it, working the fingers of my other hand around his thick neck. A forearm around my own neck tugged me and I was standing over the sofa, held from behind. My eye caught Benny Lufts and the automatic in his hand on the other side of the sofa. I dropped the broken glass.

Red wrinkles oozed across the lower half of Syd's face. He passed his hand over them dazedly and looked unbelievingly at the blood. Then he lunged off the sofa, coming between me and the automatic. I brought my knee up hard into his windpipe and he slithered heavily to the floor.

"Enough. Enough," came from Mortola and the arm around my neck relaxed. "Get the hell up off the carpet and into the kitchen," he barked at Syd. "Wash that stuff off your face."

Syd shook himself like a wet bulldog, climbed up the sofa to his feet. He stood there, staring down at the broken glass on the oriental rug. Maroon spots flecked his gabardine suit. He felt his face and his neck. He reached for the bulge under his coat.

"Go on. Get in the kitchen," Mortola barked.

When Syd trudged across the room the hold on my neck was released. Eddie walked over to Benny Lufts. I ignored the automatic and sat down. "I told you," I reminded the room in general, "my head is sore as a boil."

The girl had dropped her magazine. She stooped, picked it up and placed it behind her on the chair. She said, "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go in the bedroom."

"I won't excuse you," I stopped her getting up. "I came her to talk to you, damned if I won't."

Mortola held out one of his oversized paws like a circus cop and she sank back in the ottoman. He turned rheumy, dull eyes on me and directed, "Go ahead, talk to her."

"Why do you want me to find Robert Donaldson?" I asked. "You weren't married to him."

The blonde glanced nervously at the big man. He answered her look with a long, arm stretching yawn. She said, "I want to see him for personal reasons."

"What are they?"

"I can't tell you. They're personal."

"You admit you weren't married to Donaldson."

"I admit nothing." She smoothed invisible wrinkles in her dress and looked away from me.

Mortola moved restlessly on the sofa as we talked, stretched his legs in front of him, pulled them back, chewed lethargically on his cigar. Finally he blurted, "Where the hell is Donaldson?"

"I don't know," I said. "I thought I had him last night. I just missed him."

"We know about last night. You talked to Donaldson up the river." He flicked his cigar ash on the rug. "Where is he now?"

"I didn't talk to him last night. I traced a girl friend of his to the river and followed her home. The house was dark when she got there and it was after two, so I couldn't break in on her. I waited until a decent hour this morning, but she was gone."

"Then how do you know he wasn't married?"

"It wasn't difficult," I explained, taking the long chance with a bald lie. "Mrs. Donaldson, or whoever she is, told me they'd been married during the war. I checked with the Army and they have no record of it."

"Very pat, Sweeney. You have an answer for everything."

"What's your interest in this, Mortola?" I asked.

He rose to his feet and scowled over me. "Donaldson is a thief," he said. "He heisted some stuff from a friend of mine. I used this broad here to get you to find him so's I could get the stuff back without no trouble from the cops." He puffed disgustedly on the cigar, which had gone out, and threw it in the fire place. "Are you going to tell me where this thief is, nice and gentle?"

"What did Donaldson steal?"

"You tell me." Satan scowled.

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

Mortola steered his wet eyes behind me expressively. I jumped off the sofa. Benny Lufts was pointing the automatic at me. Eddie, leering happily, took a step forward. The telephone chose this moment to fill the room with its screams.

Mortola started and said, "Hold it." He answered the phone. "Yes," he said into the receiver. "He's here now . . . No . . . Wait a second, I'll go in the other room." He lay down the receiver and walked through a door on the far side of the room.

I lit a cigarette and threw the match in the fireplace. The girl sat tensely in the ottoman. She was definitely not so tan and composed today. There was an anxious, almost frightened cast in her blue green eyes as they observed the wrestling fingers in her lap. I started to compliment her on making a patsy of me when Mortola stuck his fat head through the door.

"Come in here, Benny," he shouted.

Benny Lufts crossed over to the door and Eddie pulled a revolver, an undersized .38, from inside his coat. Nobody trusted me. From the other side of the room Syd came in. He was wearing two strips of adhesive tape and the uncovered part of his face was a jigsaw of wine colored scratches.

"Why don't chou plug the bastard?" Syd asked his partner.

"Wait for Frankie," Eddie advised, as if it were only a question of timing.

"Think of the neighbors too," I warned.

Eddie laughed caustically. "No neighbors, and they's no other tenants in the building."

Mortola returned, followed by Benny Lufts. His step was less elephantine, his eyes shinier. "Put up the gun, Eddie," he instructed, like a benevolent satan. "Sweeney is on our side, after all. Ain't you Sweeney?"

"Indirectly," I said, motioning toward the girl. "She's my client."

"Sure she is, and I sent her to you. You done a good job so far, consid'ring my boys been looking for Donaldson two weeks. Okay, stick to it. You find me Donaldson, I'll pay you plenty." He stood with his back to the fireplace, rubbing his buttocks sensuously as if he had just come in from a snowstorm and there was a fire in the grate.

"I have nothing against money," I remarked.

"Course you haven't," Mortola inspected his three torpedos speculatively. "Benny, you and Eddie take Sweeney to the nearest cab stand." He glowered at the bandaged gladiator, "Leave the gear with Syd, Benny."

Benny Lufts handed Syd a square leather case, the size of a safety razor kit. Syd put it in his coat

pocket and directed a venomous stare at me. "You and yours truly ain't quits yet, Sweeney. Not by a long shot." He spat the words at me.

I agreed I wasn't through with him. Benny Lufts and Eddie led me to the elevator and back to the green Buick. This time I drew the rear seat. I relaxed on the foam rubber cushions, surprised and happy to be alive.

Driving, Eddie asked, "Who's the guy on the phone?"

"Skip it," Benny Lufts told him.

I interjected, "Don't mind me, boys. You heard Frankie. I'm one of the family."

"That's what I mean," Eddie kept on. "We're all set to work this shamus over. Frankie gets a buzz and it's all off, we're buddy-buddy. What gives? I got a right to know."

"Frankie's got a contact," Benny Lufts said. "Nobody knows him but Frankie. It's none of our business. Shaddup and dump this clown off somewheres."

They dropped me at a cab stand on Portrero and I caught a Yellow to the Mayflower building. The green Buick followed. There was a white ticket under the windshield wiper of my heap, the parking meter alongside blushed. It was three-thirty and they start towing cars away from Mission Street at four, but I decided to see Booker again before I moved it.

A handful of people were grouped outside the entrance to the Mayflower offices. They were talking and listening aimlessly to each other, like people do sometimes when there's a big league ball game on a store radio. But there was no radio here.

I met Jimmy Underhill, a crime reporter on the Evening Herald, as he was coming down the stairs. His boyish face under a crew haircut registered astonishment. "Me and the cops are looking for you, Bill." He grabbed my arm and turned me around, leading me into the street.

"The cops?"

"Your friend and mine, Inspector Hank Stroth," Jimmy said. "The boss man of this shirt outfit is dead as hell. Hank thinks it's murder and you're his number one suspect." We had covered half a block and were opposite a bar called Friendly's. The green Buick was parked down the street. Jimmy added, "I don't like to be seen in public with a murderer, but you can buy me a drink."

I accepted. "Come on. Tell me how I killed this guy."

## EIGHT

After Syd and Eddie had escorted me from Booker's office his secretary returned from her coffee break and proceeded with her usual routine. At five minutes past two a phone call came in for her boss. When he didn't answer her buzz the girl entered his office and

found him sprawled on the floor, dead. A superficial medical examination showed that Booker was an addict and had died from narcotics poisoning: he had taken or been given a shot of poisoned dope. A Mr. Sweeney called on him between one-thirty and two. No one saw him leave the office.

"This Booker was a real mainliner," Jimmy was saying. "His arms had been punctured so many times the veins are covered with scar tissue. Hank figures, from the shape he was in, somebody had to give him his dose. Whoever it was, probably you, slipped him a hot shot."

I ordered two more drinks and asked Jimmy to wait. I went to the phone booth at the end of the bar and called my office. When Hilda answered I asked if the cops were there.

She sing-songed, "Mr. Sweeney isn't in right now, would you care to leave a message?"

"I'm at a place called Friendly's near the Mayflower building," I said. I read her the phone number off the dial. "If you get the chance, call me here."

"I can let you have an appointment at ten o'clock Monday if that's satisfactory, Mr. Ottomeyer."

I hung up and returned to the bar. I gave Jimmy my car keys and told him where the heap was parked. "Move it for me before they tow it away, will you?"

"Sure. I came over in a squad car. I'll drive it back to the mill and leave word where it is. But first, what's the scoop?"

I gave Jimmy most of the pieces, including a warning against the two hoods in the Buick. We often work together, and he's willing to hold up his story until he receives the sign. When I finished he whistled softly.

"They cut out the middleman," he said. "There must be millions in this."

"Not only that, but the arms of the octopus don't know where the head is. Receive and deliver and get paid, that's all the members of this organization know. Take Donaldson, he didn't even know what he was doing."

"Do you think they've organized the pushers too?"

"Certainly, and the pushers only see one man. All they're interested in is the supply and quality. They're easy. But what we've got is the whole trolley set up—Bassey's, who package the horse, the damn fool salesman who ferries it up the coast, and these Pennant stores which are undoubtedly putting it up in caps and distributing it to the public. The only thing missing is the source."

We finished our drinks and Jimmy left. I ordered a steak sandwich and ate it at the bar. When Hilda didn't phone I ordered another. For no good reason I scowled at the bartender when he brought the food.

I was sore at a lot of people right now, but I wanted one big guy to hate and the name eluded me. Booker, the spineless sucker fish, was dead. Donaldson and Doris O'Rourke were counting each other's fingers over in Moraga. Syd and Eddie, the imports, had helium between their ears. Benny Lufts was nothing more than a shadow for Mortola, a meatball to carry his horse and carriage around and take the rap for possession if they ever got picked up. Mortola was the bloat with the guns, but someone with brains was aiming them for him. And the girl?

The phone in the booth rang and I bounded to it. Hilda was calling from the ladies' room of our office building. "A sweet young man in a blue suit has been keeping me company all afternoon," she said. "I had to smuggle my notes out in my brassiere."

"Read 'em while they're warm."

"First, here's what I did this afternoon. I went to the Green Slipper. It wasn't busy so early, and when the bartender left for a minute I got a good look at the liquor license on the wall. It's issued to a Melvin Danzig, Frank Mortola is a limited partner. Then I went down to the recorder's office and searched the Bassey and Mayflower Shirt properties. They are both leased out by the Sungate Investment Company."

I interrupted, "Ashton Brubaker's corporation?"

"Yes. I looked him up too, in the library. He is the Sungate Investment Company."

"Hell, he owns half the state."

"Wait till you hear the rest. Jack Holland phoned from Gravenstein a few minutes ago. He checked Pennant Shirts in Sacramento. They're a wholly owned subsidiary of Sungate."

"Yoicks."

"And among other enterprises Sungate controls Zephyr House, a Los Angeles import-export firm," Hilda related. "I couldn't ask Jack many questions with the gendarme here, but I gathered Miss O'Rourke's house up the river was broken into and whoever did it made inquiries at Artcraft Studios. Jack didn't go to the police because they might hold him, so that's all he knows."

"Where is he now?"

"On his way home."

"Good girl, Hilda. Will you stay at the office until he gets there?"

"I certainly will." Hilda paused, and I heard a door slam over the receiver. "One more thing, Anne Donaldson phoned. She's staying in room thirty-three at the Beckett hotel. She wants to see you."

"The hell she does. Shall I wear a bullseye on my back?"

"She sounded awfully disturbed, Bill."

"Okay, Hilda. It's almost five. Lock up and get a bite to eat, then go back and wait for Jack."

I hung up and rang Jimmy Un-

derhill. He had left the chevvy outside the Herald Building, the keys in the glove compartment. I went back to the bar and finished my steak. When the bartender cleared the plates away I asked him to call me two cabs.

"Two taxis?"

"That's what I said."

"Who's the second one for?"

"Will you call the cabs or shall I go out in the street and whistle for them?"

The bartender shrugged and reached for a direct line phone under the counter. "Two cabs to Friendly's," he said. "Yeah, two."

A few minutes later the driver of the first one came in. When I asked if he wanted to make a quick saw, he tilted his visored cap back on his head and regarded me shrewdly.

"There's a green Buick sedan with two men in it parked down the street," I explained. "I'm trying to dodge it."

The driver walked to the front of the bar and peered through dusty venetian blinds into the street. He lifted his cap, scratched his head and came back. "Jersey plates," he commented. "I thought they might be cops."

"They're not cops." I placed a ten dollar bill on the counter. "There's a car in front and in back of them. You double park for five minutes so they can't move out."

"Wife trouble?"

I nodded.

The driver seemed doubtful. "There's buses on this street, you know. I'll get a whale of a ticket if I screw one up."

"If it works, I'll leave another sawbuck with the bartender for you tomorrow."

The driver glanced at his wrist watch, picked up the bill and left. By the time the second cab arrived traffic was already congested. The hood of the double parked cab was up, the driver was angrily tapping engine parts with a screwdriver. Benny Lufts and Eddie cursed him violently from the trapped Buick. I hopped into the second cab quickly and directed the driver. He eased around the bottleneck and drove me to the Herald building, where I picked up the heap.

The Beckett hotel was an ancient, red shingled building which sat between two modern apartment houses and grinned rowdily with chipped marble teeth. I climbed the teeth to the lobby, sauntered past a drowsy clerk who was studying entries at Eastern racetracks he hoped to visit someday, and entered a fragile steel cage. A freckle faced Negro woman in a faded green jacket monogrammed Beckett let me off at the fifth floor. I walked past Men, Women and Bath to room thirty-three.

"Who is it?" an almost inaudible voice answered my rap on the door.

"William Jeremiah Sweeney," I whispered.

The door edged open and I entered a stern, acrid room with a

latticed wrought iron bed, two wooden chairs, a writing desk and a mirrorless dresser. A vee had been cut in worn carpet from the door to the bed to the wash basin in the corner. One grimy window admitted begrudgingly that there was light outside.

The blonde closed the door behind me and wheeled to the large handbag on the dresser. She took a billfold out of it, extracted a card and handed it to me.

The card was a driver's license which described the blonde briefly, said she lived in Menlo Park and her name was Anne Marie Booker.

I returned the license. She glanced at it absently and tossed it on the dresser. I gave her a cigarette, took one myself, lit them. She dropped into the chair by the writing desk and said, "Ralph Booker was my stepfather."

"You heard?" I decided the bed would hold me and sat on it.

"After you left, they let me go in the bedroom," she said. "I was listening to the radio, hoping to get those awful people out of my mind, when the announcer interrupted with a news flash." Anne shivered a little. "There was no one in the living room, I could hear the men talking in another part of the house. I just picked up my things and walked out. I caught the first bus I saw and it brought me downtown. I walked around for a while, wondering what to do, and then decided to register at a hotel."

"You picked a good spot."

"Oh, I feel such a fool," she said tearfully. "I had no idea what I was doing. I walked into it blindly and trustingly, and I had no right or reason to trust him."

"Tell me about it."

"I want to. Those men are after you; and the police are looking for you, the announcer said. If it hadn't been for me . . ."

"Cheer up. These things happen in my business."

Anne crushed her cigarette in the desk tray and fastened her eyes on a vanishing hummingbird in the pallid wallpaper. "My mother was a registered nurse," she said. "My father had been dead six years when she met Ralph Booker. He was a lung patient in the hospital where she worked and, for reasons I'll never understand, she fell in love with him." She was speaking laboriously, with a catch in her voice. "Ralph was in terrible pain at the time, perhaps pity grew into love. Anyway, he was operated on successfully, one lung was removed and my mother married him shortly afterwards."

Anne reached for another cigarette. I lit it for her and snuffed out mine.

"I suppose Ralph received no more drugs while he was ill than any other patient, but he grew too fond of them. A slight cold, a business setback, anything, became an excuse to seek relief in narcotics. It became a habit. Mother worried

and coddled him, even fought with him, but it was no use." Anne shook her head, dropped her eyes to the floor. "We couldn't find out where or how Ralph got the stuff. We did know he was paying extravagantly for it. He was squeezed out of his business finally, and was forced to take a salaried job with Mayflower, a company he organized himself."

I asked, "Before that, what business was he in?"

"Sungate Investments," she said, bitterness creeping into her voice. "Ralph started the company from scratch. Later he took in his attorney, Ashton Brubaker, as a partner. It was Mr. Brubaker who forced him out. Think of where he is today."

"He's somewhere, all right."

"Mother hung on to Ralph, always hoping he would straighten out. When I was ready for college she dug into her savings and sent me to UCLA. I could have gone to Cal or Stanford, but mother wanted to get me away from the unwholesome atmosphere in our own home." Anne frowned at her cigarette. "She died two years ago, just before I graduated, sick with worry and helplessness over Ralph. She wasn't fifty years old."

"After UCLA I took a position with a Menlo Park attorney and moved there," she continued. "From time to time Ralph called and asked me to have dinner with him, or to attend one social function or another. I always accepted. Petty and weak as Ralph was, I knew mother would have wanted me to help him. I was his only family and I think our meetings, going out in public together, gave him a big lift."

"I can see that."

"On Wednesday he came down to Menlo Park himself," Anne said "He told me that one of his salesmen, Robert Donaldson, had disappeared without a trace, and some valuable designs and patterns had disappeared with him. He told me Donaldson might be trying to sell out to a Mayflower competitor, or he may have met with an accident, but it was imperitive he be found. Because of the publicity which would result if he had done anything dishonest the company wanted to soft pedal his disappearance and by-pass the police. It was Ralph's personal responsibility." She sighed resignedly, put out her cigarette. "He outlined his plan: I was to impersonate a non-existent ex-wife and employ you to find him. It seemed like a harmless ruse then. I agreed and arranged for time off with my boss. You know the rest."

"You're damn lucky his plan failed," I observed. "If Mortola's hoods followed me to Donaldson, you and I would be the leads to what happened to him later."

"They wanted to kill him."

"Yeah, they did. Ralph Booker was a pawn in a giantic narcotics'

operation. Murder is a mere business detail to them."

"I was a fool," she said bitterly.

"I don't believe your step father realized you were in danger. He probably thought Donaldson and I would be taken care of quietly and you could return to Menlo Park in complete innocence." Anne refused a cigarette, I lit another. "That seems to be the original plan. Later, when things got involved, Ralph Booker was eliminated because he wouldn't stand for what they were doing to you. How did you happen to leave the hotel this morning with Benny Lufts?"

"He called at the hotel and said Ralph asked him to drive me home. He took me to Mortola's instead and held me prisoner."

"Your stepfather may not have known about that."

"I'd like to think so," Anne said wistfully. She added, "They're planning to find out from you where Donaldson is located, I overheard them talking this afternoon. If you haven't led them to Donaldson by eight o'clock, they expect to beat it out of you."

"What happens at eight?"

"They're having some kind of meeting. I overheard Mortola say that a shipment came in this afternoon and they'd have to get things straightened out before they could move it."

"A shipment of heroin?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, they're pretty excited about it."

"Where are they meeting?"

"It sounded like Danzee's, or Danzer's."

"Danzig's, the Green Slipper?"

"Possibly."

"That's a break," I said, getting up. "I'm going to leave you now, for awhile. I'm afraid you'll have to remain here in your room though, tough assignment." I squeezed her shoulder lightly. "Don't leave under any circumstances."

She smiled bleakly. "I'll stay."

## NINE

I made two phone calls from the lobby of the hotel. The first was to my office, where a cop was still stationed. Jack Holland hadn't turned up yet. I filled in Hilda on the latest developments, and asked her to pass them on to Jack when he arrived.

"Yes, Mr. Ottomeyer," she said.

I dialled police headquarters and asked for Inspector Stroth, homicide. A gruff voice said, "Inspector Stroth speaking."

"Hello, Hank. This is Bill Sweeney . . ."

"You son of a bitch, we've got a bulletin out on you, as if you don't know. Where the hell are you?"

"Take it easy, Hank. I called to tell you about it," I said into the phone. I began with my first visit to Ralph Booker and sketched in all the picture I had.

When I finished Hank snapped,

"Come down to the Hall."

"Let me play it my way. They need me bad, Hank. I'll just walk into the Green Slipper tonight and see what happens."

"You'll get yourself killed," he said. "No special loss, but we need you to finger these guys. Come down to the Hall."

"Admit one thing, Hank," I argued. "The most important guy in this setup is Brubaker. We have evidence on everybody but him. We don't even know if he'll show at the meeting. Only way we can trap him is for me to walk in there alone and declare my hand."

"What is your hand?"

"The best. They can't do business for Donaldson with anyone but me, and I won't do business with anyone but Brubaker."

"All right," Hank said grudgingly. "Go ahead, I'll be watching the Slipper. Seems to me they've got a room upstairs and a direct rear entrance, used to shoot craps up there at one time."

"Yeah," I said. "And Hank, will you call San Francisco's finest off my back? I'd like to go home for a minute."

"Go ahead, Bill. I'll cancel the bulletin on you." He hung up.

I left the hotel, nursed two bottles of beer through the next half hour in a nearby bar, then drove over to my apartment. I decided the time had come to strap on my shoulder holster. There was an assortment of weapons in the safe at my office. Why didn't I go there?

I opened the door of my apartment and stepped inside, reaching for the wall light switch. The lights were snapped on before I found it. Frankie Mortola used his free hand to slam the door. In his other hand he held a .45 service automatic pointed at my belt buckle.

Ashton Brubaker, a neat white haired man in an oxford gray suit, was sitting in my reading chair. He was petting a black homburg in his lap and watching me gravely through sharp brown eyes. Like his pictures in the financial and society pages, he looked like a man any widow could trust with the life savings. He had a cherubic face with sparse white eyebrows, a Roman nose and full red mouth. His complexion, a credit to his barber, was soft, smooth and pink. His manicurist could take a bow too. His pink hands could easily advertise toilet soap for milady. With him in it, my apartment looked shoddy.

"Mohammed has come to the mountain, Sweeney," Brubaker said in a cool, well modulated voice.

"Hello, Mo," I greeted. "How can I be of service?"

"Sit down," he commanded. When I dropped into a chair he proposed, "Let us begin by saying that you know the whereabouts of some people I am most anxious to see. You are going to tell me where I can locate these people. If you do so

immediately, you will be rewarded with a fair sum of money in compensation for your efforts. If you don't do so immediately . . . Well, you will eventually, and your only reward will be in the hereafter."

"You have it all figured out."

"Nicely."

"Who are these people you're looking for?"

"Don't be evasive," Brubaker advised sternly. "We are speaking, as you know, of Robert Donaldson, his lady friend, and Ralph Booker's daughter." His tone flew further north as he added in a hard cold voice, "I want them, you know where they are. I'm going to get them."

"How much is this fair sum?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Considering you're in a billion dollar business, that's rather cheap."

Brubaker frowned and stared at his manicured nails. He lifted the sharp eyes to Mortola inquiringly. Mortola shrugged.

"I know a lot, Brubaker," I said. "You control a number of supposedly legitimate enterprises through the Sungate Investment Company. You import heroin, transport it up and down the coast, cut it and distribute it. You control what is probably the biggest illegal holding company in the country. Under the circumstances, five grand is short of the mark."

Brubaker regrouped his features for bargaining, asked, "What would hit the mark?"

"One hundred thousand," I told him blandly. "Now, tonight. For that I turn over all I've got."

"Surely you don't expect me to have that much money in cash."

"No, but I have an idea. Suppose you give me the equivalent of a box of Bassey's special brand of candy, say a kilo of heroin, for security. That's worth more than a hundred grand to you. I'll hold it until you come up with the cash."

"Another impossibility," Brubaker said. "We don't keep the merchandise around, you know. We get rid of it as fast as it arrives."

"You have plenty of it on hand now, and you can't get rid of it through regular channels until Donaldson and friends are decommissioned."

Brubaker directed another inquiring glance at Mortola. This time the ugly man spat, "The broad, Mr. Brubaker. She must've had her ear bent to the door while we was talking and then gone to him with it."

"You've bungled every single thing today, Frankie," Brubaker's mouth curled contemptuously at his aide. He turned to me, "I sent Booker's daughter to you, because you have a reputation for getting things done and I want Donaldson badly. You have done much more than I thought. So you've found the girl and learned we received a new shipment today. Do you know where the shipment is?"

"No."

Brubaker laughed sourly. "It was a silly question." He said to Mortola, "Give me that cannon." Mortola handed him the .45 shakily, stood dumbly in the center of the floor until Brubaker ordered, "Now get on the phone. Change the rendezvous. Tell your men to get the stuff out of there and hurry it up."

The heavy weapon looked ludicrous in Brubaker's small pink mitt, but lethal enough. Brubaker began to laugh mirthlessly. The joke was on me, I knew.

"I agree to your terms, Sweeney," he said over the sounds of Mortola on the telephone. "You were right about our having a supply on hand. A surprise shipment arrived this afternoon as a matter of fact. We'll drive over and consummate our transaction, if that's agreeable to you."

"That's agreeable," I said. "Where are we going?"

"To my home," he said, smiling icily.

"Your home."

"My home," he repeated.

## TEN

They drove me to a rambling wooden mansion on Pacific street, a columnar, corniced affair shuddering in the thickening fog. As we pulled into the driveway the searching beacon on Alcatraz island in the bay below winked imperatively. Benny Lufts, unpleasantly surprised to see me, admitted us to a high ceilinged foyer in which you could have promoted jai-alai games. He ushered us into a thick carpeted library with a red brick fireplace, two draped French windows and walls completely lined with books.

"What, no butler?" I asked.

"The servants have been given the evening off," Brubaker apologized.

The large, brightly lit room was comfortably furnished with two chesterfields, arm chairs and cocktail tables grouped around the fireplace. There was a flat maplewood desk and swivel chair in one corner. A small brown skinned man with a dry, wrinkled face sat in an overstuffed chair beside the fireplace. As we came in he placed a brandy glass on the table beside him and stood up. He moved lithely, like a jockey, to Ashton Brubaker and shook hands.

"And this is Sweeney," Brubaker offered, turning to me. "Sweeney, meet Senor Ramero, one of my associates." The brown skinned man eyed me curiously with flashing eyes as he gripped my hand. Brubaker said, "I'll fix a drink. Benny, bring Syd and Eddie right in when they arrive."

I sat in the mate to Ramero's chair when he reseated himself. Mortola sat on a chesterfield.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Sweeney," Ramero said with a bare rem-

nant of some south of the border culture. "I have heard you are a very clever man."

"Thank you, Senor." I was weighing the availability of the andirons alongside the fireplace. With Hank Stroth geared for the Green Slipper I needed help from somewhere. When Brubaker distributed the drinks I asked, "Just get into town?"

"This afternoon," Ramero said with a parchment smile.

Brubaker sat on the edge of a chesterfield. "Senor Ramero has personally engineered the shipment we talked about," he said admiringly. "While the politicians were arguing and cutting throats in Guatemala, the senor calmly and efficiently raided their drug supplies."

"We are talking openly," Ramero cautioned.

Brubaker waved his glass expansively, "We're making Sweeney a member of the firm, Senor Ramero. He knows too much, holds too many key cards for us to do otherwise." He winked crudely at the other man as I tilted my head away to sip my drink. "Sweeney is holding some of our people for ransom, so to speak, and we are going to exchange a kilo of merchandise for their release. Additionally, I think he would be an asset to our organization. Don't you agree, Senor?"

Ramero stared thoughtfully at the white haired man for a moment, then said, "I understand you, amigo. It is a wise decision." Brubaker beamed into his glass.

"I could easily replace this tub of nerves," I proposed, indicating the sweating Mortola. He half rose and Brubaker motioned him back. I added, "I'm surprised you tolerate hop heads in an operation this size, gentlemen."

Brubaker frowned at the fidgeting Mortola. He said, "Frankie is a before and after picture. Originally, he had no use for drugs . . ."

I interrupted, "But you made them available and attractive, so he'd fall into the trap and your hold over him would be tightened. Like Ralph Booker."

Mortola lunged off the chesterfield and I moved out of my chair quickly. Caught off balance, he steadied himself on the chair arm and straightened up, coming after me like an angry ape.

"Stop." Ramero demanded in a voice so low it startled us. "Please sit down again, both of you." He held a snub nosed .38 on us. We returned to our seats respectfully and he buried the gun somewhere inside his coat. "This is a time for words," he explained briefly.

Chimes echoed in the deep foyer outside the library. Benny Lufts stuck his head inside the door. "They're here, Eddie and Syd."

"Tell 'em to bring the stuff in," Mortola clipped. He cleared half the space on the cocktail table between the two chesterfields. My friends, Eddie and the bandaged

Syd, entered. Eddie carried a small black satchel.

"You here, you bastard?" Syd thundered at me. The adhesive strips on his face reflected light and made his eyes look eerily chalked.

Eddie opened the bag and transferred five chamois pouches to the cleared space on the cocktail table. When he finished Brubaker said, "Now get out. Wait in the hall." He turned to me and said coldly, "There it is Sweeney, five kilos of pure heroin, eleven pounds in all. It was originally destined for our candy maker, but now we will have one bag less."

"Until you reach the bank in the morning," I corrected.

I took a bag off the table and unwound the leather thongs which bound it. Inside the black, treated lining I saw the crystalline white mass, the tiny particles which transformed healthy men into degenerate cripples and swelled the cash boxes of perverted bloodsuckers. I retied the pouch and replaced it on the table, asked, "All the way from Guatemala?"

"Via airplane, pack mule, horse and truck," Brubaker bragged.

Ramero grinned, "Followed by Cadillac."

"Now for your end of the bargain, Sweeney. Where are Donaldson and his friend and the Booker girl."

"I'll take you to them," I offered.

"We're not fools. Tell us where they are and we'll get them."

"Mrs. Sweeney didn't raise any stupid children either, Brubaker."

Ramero stretched out his legs in the overstuffed chair. "We seem to be at an impasse," he said calmly. "May I make a suggestion. Let Mr. Sweeney phone these persons and we will listen in on the extension. He can direct them here on a pretense. When they arrive we will complete the transaction."

"I don't like the idea of their coming here," Brubaker said.

"It's dark and foggy," Ramero advised. "No one will see them arrive. It is the best way, I think. Mr. Sweeney?"

"I agree on one condition. I've got to be cleared on the Ralph Booker rap." Mortola who had been sitting back listlessly, started as I spoke.

Brubaker hedged. "That wasn't our agreement."

"Take it or leave it. A hundred grand won't do me any good with the cops looking for me."

Brubaker beckoned to Mortola and they retired to the far corner of the room and whispered at each other. When they were seated again Brubaker said, "Very well, Sweeney. The hypo Eddie used is in the glove compartment of the Buick. We'll arrange to have him found with it after the deal is closed."

Mortola had regained his bull-like poise and scowled self-confidently. I nodded agreement and went to the phone on the desk in the corner. Brubaker followed and

picked up a second phone, flipped a switch on its base. His brows shot up when I called a Moraga number and Max Wendell answered.

"Hello, Max. How are my two clients?"

"Nice kids, Bill. They're doing the dinner dishes."

"Put Donaldson on the phone will you?"

Donaldson sounded excited. He asked immediately, "Is everything okay?"

I told him it was and gave him the Pacific street address. I said the police were here and wanted to ask him and Miss O'Rourke some questions.

"I'll tear right over," he shouted his relief.

"Don't get picked up on the bridge for speeding," I cautioned, hoping he would. It was eight-forty by my watch. The trip should take him slightly more than half an hour.

My next call was tougher. "Beckett Hotel," a switchboard operator announced, as if she were proud of it. She rang Anne's room several times before it was answered hesitantly. I gave Anne the address on Pacific street and asked her to come over.

"But you told me not to leave the room under any circumstances," she said in a scared voice.

"There's been a change in plans."

"All right, I'll call a cab. You're sure it's safe?"

Brubaker put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone I was using. "No cabs," he said harshly. "Tell her to stay where she is. Tell her you'll pick her up." He removed his hand.

"Never mind, Anne," I said. "Stay where you are, as I said. I'll drop over there and get you."

When I replaced the receiver Brubaker took a phone directory from a drawer of the desk and strode across the room to Mortola. "Your hooligans haven't been able to follow Sweeney across a street," he blurted out in a high voice. "Do you think they could do a simple job like going to the Beckett Hotel and picking up Booker's daughter?" When the big man nodded, Brubaker threw the phone book in his lap. "Look up the address and get her then." As Mortola left the room he wiped his forehead with a silk lapel handkerchief.

I returned to my chair and gulped the remains of my drink. Ramero watched me with bright eyes as Brubaker replenished our glasses. "A satisfactory conclusion to a hard day's work," he toasted. Brubaker snickered and raised his glass. I drank to that.

Mortola came back and stood glaring down at me, the big meathooks at his side clasping and unclasping spasmodically. "You're all mine, Sweeney. I'm gonna squeeze that neck of yours till the apple pops out."

"I must ask you to be seated again," came from Ramero.

Brubaker barked, "Sit down, Frankie."

Mortola turned sullenly. "Why wait? We got what we wanted."

"Wait for the others," Ramero told him drily. "You will have one big meal."

## ELEVEN

At five minutes past nine we heard the screech of brakes in the driveway. Mortola, peering through one of the French windows, said, "Foggy as hell out there. It's the Buick." He turned, adding, "They got the broad with 'em."

When the chimes sounded Mortola went to the library doors and flung them open. He hesitated in the doorway a moment, then leaped back drawing the .45 from inside his coat. He fired it twice through the doorway, then crouched against the side of the wall as his shots were answered.

Ramero managed to get the gun halfway out of his coat before I jumped him. It exploded into my shoulder, almost deafening me, as his chair overturned and we fell to the floor grappling. We struggled fiercely to the loud cacophony of stacatto shots echoing and reechoing in the tall rooms. My right arm was useless and I couldn't hold off Ramero. He hit me across the ear with the gun, kicked himself away and sprang to his feet like a cornered lynx. As I lunged up at him I knew he'd be able to fire the .38 before I made it, but his hand sagged miraculously and he slumped to the floor amid a burst of gunfire. I sprawled over his twitching body.

"It missed the bone," Jack Holland diagnosed. We were sitting on the chesterfield and Jack was inspecting the wound in my arm. He looked very chic in a tight linen dress and a wide saucer hat with a red ribbon on it.

"Mrs. Holland, I know your son Jack. How is he?"

"He's fine and dandy," Jack said, "and he just saved your bloody life. When you didn't show at the Green Slipper by eight o'clock, Hank Stroth left his men there and we tailed the hoods in the Buick up here. When they left again to pick up the girl we ran 'em in on the burglary charge. Our client lent me this rig. Hank and Sergeant Purdy switched clothes with Syd and Eddie, and escorted me here in the Buick."

"Thank God for that."

"I had an idea you'd be pleased. I was pretty sure you were inside."

The library still smelled of gun smoke. The late Senor Ramero lay on his side on the floor, the .38 gripped tightly in his brown hand. Over by the door, Frankie Mortola sat against the wall with blood on his face and coat. Ashton Brubaker sat dreamily on the chesterfield, as if he had never moved. I said, "That leaves Benny Lufts."

"He's dead. Mortola hit him firing at us." Jack looked regretfully

at the gasping man in the doorway. "Mortola will live."

"Good," I said. "He'll sing his head off when they cut his supply of hop."

Hank Stroth, in pink shirt, gray suit and hat, entered the room. He had just met Robert Donaldson and Doris O'Rourke, and sent them home. "You take some chances, boy," he growled at me. "What happens if these people come over here and there's no police around?"

"I knew there'd be cops," I explained, "since I told this whole story to you, a man of experience, keen powers of observation and a high degree of intelligence."

Hank started to say something, but glanced at Brubaker and checked himself. Instead he said, "The whole coast has been alerted since you phoned me—police, sheriffs, state and government narcotics' agencies. I just radioed the go ahead. We'll swoop down on every mother's son of them before morning."

The ambulance crew came in and fussed with Mortola.

"The ambulance is outside," Hank snapped at me. "Go on, get in it. I'll have a long talk with you later about the way you've handled this case." He stomped across the room and jerked the dazed Brubaker to his feet, clapped the cuffs on him in almost the same motion. Hank hit Brubaker across the face with his open hand and clipped, "Wake up, bigshot. Time to holler for a lawyer."

I watched the attendants struggle to place the wounded Mortola on their stretcher. He had passed out, but even in repose his fat face scowled. Defense attorneys wouldn't be heckling me much at this trial. Frankie Mortola was going to talk and talk and talk.

I KNOW YOU'RE in the room, bug. I think in the wall. You must've heard me and Floyd talking, so you know how we're trapped.

Bug, do you hear me? You're our one chance. Bring help.

A second car just pulled up behind the trees. Four guns now, but they'll take their time on account they know how straight I can shoot. If I was running this from their side, I'd wait till dark before moving in. There's time to save me, bug.

I don't mean too much time. Could be there's hardly any time.

This is all the thanks I get from Lew Angel. Did I wish him anything bad? All I did was for his own good. Sure, me and Floyd Finch were looking out for our own good too. What hurts Lew hurts us. Like they say in Washington, D.C., we're a team.

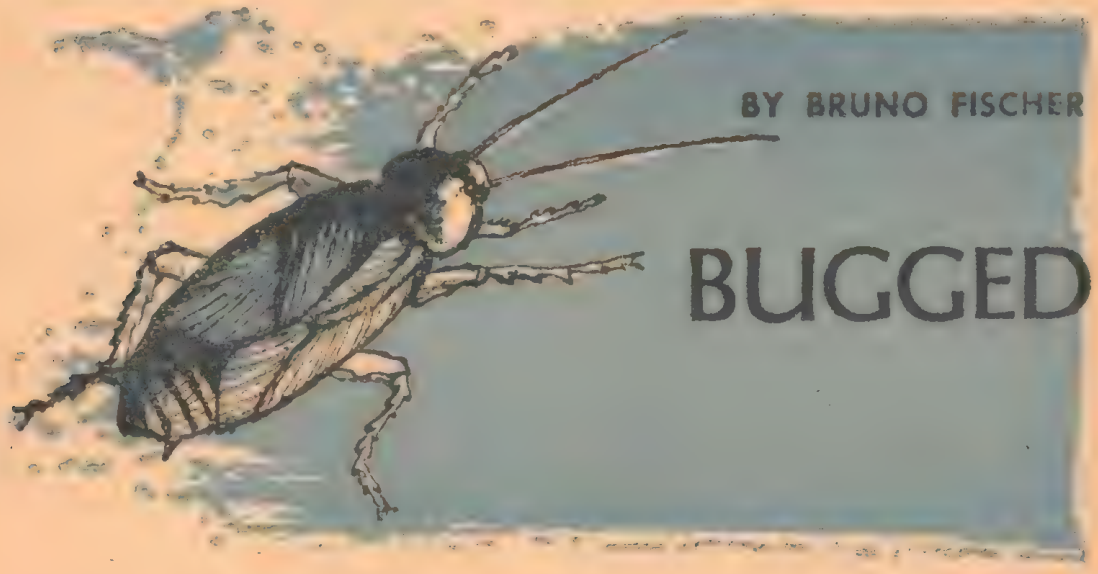
I mean were.

We came up from nothing together, me and Lew and Floyd. It wasn't easy. You take a city like this. It isn't Chicago or even St. Louis, but it's a city. Let a guy be five times as smart as Lew Angel, he doesn't climb to the top of the rackets without he has help. My kind of help. Even Floyd's kind.

Many a time I saved Lew's life. And when somebody big needed cooling, who did Lew depend—

Well, never mind about that.

Fact is, I was a lot more to him than his muscle. More than his



BY BRUNO FISCHER

# BUGGED

*We come up together from nothing. The three of us, me and Lew and Floyd. From nothing to the top. Then Lew gets bugged by this broad . . . a school teacher no less. I had to do something.*

bodyguard. I was his pal. All of a sudden, does this mean a thing to him? Nothing! On account of a dame.

Out there they're not starting to make any move to close in. I'm at a window talking to you, bug, while I'm watching them among the trees. They look like they're talking things over.

A school teacher. Those are the worst kind. A kindergarten teacher, no less.

There's Lew Angel, so big in town he can get hot-looking dames by the dozen by reaching out for them. Who does he reach for? Who's he been dating two, three times a week this last month? Esther Hunt.

I don't mean she's bad-looking. It's just that if you stood on a street corner with nothing to do, you'd hardly bother giving her the double-o as she walked by. Kind of small and very quiet. And no idea of fun.

Tuesday night I found out what Esther Hunt was doing to Lew.

We picked her up at eight o'clock at her run-down, walk-up apartment house. Usually Lew liked to drive, but when she was with him they sat in back, leaving me sitting alone in front like I was nothing but a chauffeur. And they held hands like a couple of teenagers. This was all he was ever getting out of her, holding hands and a good-night kiss, and from the looks of her I didn't think he'd ever get more. Go figure him. For this he had to become the big wheel in the rackets?

She dragged us to see Shakespeare, no less.

Lew's dates used to be pleasure. Hot spots and parties. If we went to the theater you could see something you could laugh at or stacked dames with hardly any clothes on. With Esther Hunt, Shakespeare! And the time before a symphony concert. And one afternoon I got sore feet tagging after them in the municipal art gallery. What a guy will do for a dame!

But you know something? This Shakespeare isn't as bad as he's cracked up to be. The play was about a Scotchman name of Macbeth and how he and his missus knocked off the king so he could become king. Just like in real life. Like right here in our own town when Yank Sands was top man in the rackets and Lew was moving up and one night me and Lew—

Never mind.

I was talking about Tuesday night. The show was over and me and Lew and Esther Hunt were moving up the aisle when a guy in front turned around. It was Allen W. McGoldrich, the new D.A., who one of the reasons he got elected was he promised the voters he'd put Lew Angel in jail.

McGoldrich said sarcastic-like, "So it's true what I hear about you, Angel, you're on a culture kick."

"This is against the law?" Lew said.

"No," McGoldrich said, he touched me under the left shoulder where I wear my clip. "I see you're dressed for the theater, Willie," he said.

"I got a license for it," I said.

"I'm aware of that," McGoldrich said. "My predecessor in office was rather lenient, wasn't he? This resulted in him becoming a much richer man than I ever will be. I could have your gun license if it was worth the effort." He turned a smile to Lew that was full of teeth and said, "I'm after much bigger game than a mere henchman."

By this time we were all at the end of the aisle. We went one way and McGoldrich the other way. And I remember how Esther Hunt looked after him. Her eyes were the best thing about her, great big brown eyes, and now they were twice as big.

I don't mean she didn't know till then what Lew's line of business was. Everybody in town knows, even kindergarten school teachers. But I think this was when she started seeing something she hadn't seen before.

From the theater we went for a drink. Not the kind you think. She had no use for the hard stuff. So help me, we had to go to an ice cream parlor.

As we were lapping up ice cream sodas, which I'm not crazy for, she looked at me across the table with her big brown eyes. "Willie," she said, "have you really got a gun?"

"Just kind of insurance, Miss Hunt," I said.

She shivered and said to Lew, "Must we always have him along with us?"

"Don't you like him, honey?" he said.

"I go out with you, not with both of you," she said.

Lew sipped his soda through the straw and didn't say anything. So I said, "I see your point, Miss Hunt, but a guy in his position is like the kings in the play we just saw. Everybody is looking to knock them off. You don't want it to happen to Lew here, do you?"

"Of course not," she said.

"So that makes the both of us," I said.

"I hate having it to be like this," she said. And looked like she was going to bust out crying.

Lew took the straw out of his mouth and said, "Scram, Willie."

"But—"

"Leave the car," he said. "Take a taxi home. Now beat it."

He was the boss. I finished the soda and left them there at the table sitting practically on top of each other. But I didn't go home. I had my responsibilities. For one thing, Augie Pitcher was getting ideas about moving into slot machines, and he'd have no trouble at all if all of a sudden Lew Angel stopped living. I got me a cab and sat in it down the street from the ice cream parlor. When they came out and drove off, I was right behind them.

They went to her place. I paid off the cabbie and leaned against the faded brick wall of the building. After a while I got tired and sat in his car. Waited better than two hours. It was maybe two-thirty when he came out, and her having to get up early to teach school. On his face he had a look like a little league kid who had just hit a home run.

I figured this time he'd gotten a lot more off Esther Hunt than a lousy good-night kiss and I was glad he was no longer wasting his time. The way he was feeling he wasn't sore I hadn't gone home like he'd told me to. Got in the car like it was a cloud and I drove him home to his swank apartment house.

"Come up for a nightcap, Willie," he said, speaking to me for the first time.

"You bet," I said, this being my first chance to get the taste of the ice cream soda out of my mouth.

Lew Angel doesn't pour it out of a bottle and give it to you. He has to mix it up first. He was standing at his bar in his living room, putting God knows what in the shaker, when I said, "I think maybe I ought to sleep here nights for a while."

"What's the matter with your cottage?" he said.

"Nothing's the matter with it. But what with Augie Pitcher . . ."

"We can forget about that," he said, shaking the shaker. "I'm getting out of the rackets."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm dead serious, Willie. This week I start pulling out." And turned around and poured into a couple of glasses.

I looked at his back that's not more than half as wide as mine. I said very slowly, "If I didn't know you, Lew, I'd think you were scared of Augie Pitcher."

"That lightweight!"

"Then it's the new D.A., McGoldrich."

"That do-gooder! He can't touch me." He handed me a glass, and a sappy look was on his face. "Drink to Esther and me, Willie. We're getting married."

"I didn't raise the glass. I said bitterly, "So she talked you into it?"

"Well, we discussed it tonight in her apartment," he admitted. "Willie, she's a wonderful girl. Nothing like the cheap broads I've been messing with all my life. She's the first girl I've wanted to marry. She's got class, Willie. Brains. Refinement. And she loves me."

"No dame is worth giving up all you have," I said.

"What have I got?" he said. "This isn't a real home. There's no loving little woman in it and no kids. Willie, I'm a man without dignity. I'm merely a glorified hoodlum."

"That's not you talking," I said. "That's the kindergarten school teacher."

"And I'm not getting any younger," he went on. "I've made my pile. Enough for us to live on the

rest of our lives. Though, as Esther says, a man should do useful work, so I'll look around for some kind of business. Strictly legitimate. In Florida or California. We'll buy a nice house in the country with a swimming pool and have four kids. Two boys and two girls." He was still way up on that cloud. "I'm thirty-six years old," he said, "and it's getting pretty late in life. Like Macbeth said in the play tonight: 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day.' "

When a guy like Lew Angel not only goes to see Shakespeare but starts reciting him, you know there's no hope for him. So at last I raised my glass and drank to their happiness, his and Esther Hunt's. But there was no taste in it for me.

I got a good look at all four of the guys among the trees, bug. Know 'em all real good. Lew's boys of course. Like I am—I mean was. Maybe one reason they're waiting is for Lew himself to show.

Bug, are you bringing help?

This set-up is perfect for them, this cottage in the hollow without another house very close. Guess you think it's a funny place for a couple of bachelors and all like Floyd and me to live instead of right in the city. But me, I like to fool around growing flowers, and Floyd can't stand the noise of traffic and kids yelling and other people's televisions blaring. Besides, there's all the privacy you want for bringing dames to.

But this isn't about any of our dames, Floyd's or mine. It's a dame I wouldn't give two cents for, but was wrecking our lives. Esther Hunt.

I came home Tuesday night and Floyd was right here in this living room working on the books. I mean Wednesday morning on account of by then it was close to four o'clock. Lew is a guy never leaves a loophole in his tax returns to give the government a chance to put the hook on him, and it being close to income tax time Floyd is working day and night on the books and tax forms and all those headaches.

I mean was. Floyd has kind of lost interest in his precious books. Right this minute he's in the kitchen crying like a baby. What can you expect from a bookkeeper?

Well, I came home around four A.M. and told Floyd about Lew going to marry this Esther Hunt and retire. He was hit as hard as I was.

He took off his glasses and blinked his watery eyes and said in that whinny voice of his, "What'll become of me?"

"The same thing as will become of me," I said. "We'll become a couple of unemployed bums. How much dough have you in the sock?"

Floyd gave a very sick laugh. "Minus about two grand. The horses haven't been running right for me."

"And me," I said, "I haven't drawn a decent hand in poker in months."

I got a bottle out from the cabinet and we sat drinking at the table and telling each other how black the future was for us. We weren't just Lew's bodyguard and Lew's bookkeeper. We were big men in the organization, and Lew paid us real good. We had real respect in this town, I tell you. But Lew turns straight and we're nothing but a couple of working stiffs on the labor market, scrounging for every lousy buck. This was a very soft life, except for Floyd at income tax time.

"There's only one thing to do," Floyd said after a few drinks. "We got to sour her on him. We'll tell her all about him."

"She reads the newspapers."

"I said all about him," Floyd said. "Things only we know. The real dirty stuff. You go to her, Willie, and tell her."

I shook my head. "No good. He's promised her to quit, and there's no dame more devoted to a guy than a good woman reforming him. This goes double for kindergarten school teachers." I reached for the bottle that by now was close to empty and said, "Let's turn it around. Sour him on her."

"You have an idea, Willie?"

"Yesterday I ran across Deuce Melody on the street," I said.

"And who may he be?"

"Deuce Melody is a con artist," I said. "A very handsome guy that slays the ladies, especially the elderly ones, by having dimples in his cheeks when he smiles. I met him two, three years ago in L.A. where he hangs around on account of that's where most of the suckers live. We were in a poker game together and after the game he fixed me up with a hot little redhead to kind of make up for all the dough he won off me." I took a drink. "Well, Deuce Melody was driving through town yesterday when the transmission of his car went. They said it'll take two days to fix it. He's never been here before. Lew doesn't know him and he doesn't know Lew. He wouldn't know whose girl Esther Hunt is. He's our boy, Floyd."

"Are you thinking, Willie, he can make time with her?"

"Not a chance," I said, "even with his dimples."

"Then what are you getting at?"

I told him, and behind his thick glasses his watery eyes got scared sick.

"I don't like it," he said.

"You got any other idea how we can hang onto our jobs?"

Floyd emptied the bottle and said, "No, I haven't."

So next day I went to see Deuce Melody in the motel outside of town where he'd told me he was staying. I could've left a message for him to meet me in a ginmill where I could've been comfortable waiting, but of course I didn't want we

should be seen together in public. I had to hang around three, four hours before he showed. Then I slipped into his cabin after him.

"My car will be ready in an hour," he said. "Nothing doing in this crummy town. I figured I'd be on my way."

"Is a chance to pick up an easy hundred bucks nothing doing?" I said.

"What is it, a divorce case?" he said. "Will I have to come back here to testify?"

"You can leave right after and never come back," I said. "Better that way. It's just that a pal of mine wants to get dirt on his girl friend so he can pull her off his neck without her raising hell. One hundred bucks."

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow night, I'm hoping."

Deuce pushed his hand through his curly hair. "To spend another night in this ghost town it will cost three hundred."

"Two hundred."

"Is she pretty?" he asked.

"A knockout. But this isn't for your pleasure."

"Pleasure is where you find it," he said, showing his dimples. "It's a deal."

The breaks are with me next evening. Yesterday evening that was. Lew and Esther Hunt didn't have a date on account of he wasn't wasting any time getting out of the rackets. He had Floyd Finch over his place going over his books with him so he'd know how big a bundle he could retire with, and later on he was going to have Augie Pitcher and other wheels over to break the news to them. So the coast was clear and at six-thirty I was ringing Esther Hunt's doorbell.

Timed it exactly right. She was finishing dinner she'd eaten by herself. Her place was a tiny two-room dump, but kind of neat.

"Seeing you and Lew are getting married," I said, "I came to make sure there are no hard feelings between us."

"There are certainly none on my part," she said. "I never disliked you. Only what you represent."

"I'm glad to hear this, Miss Hunt," I said, "on account of I'm going on the straight and narrow too."

"Why, that's wonderful, Willie," she said.

"Let's have a drink on it," I said.

"I don't drink whiskey," she said. Which I knew she didn't. "But I was about to have coffee. Will you have a cup with me?" Which is what I'd hoped she'd say.

She poured the coffee. While she was in the kitchen getting some cake to go with it, I emptied into her cup the powder I'd gotten from a druggest pal. It wouldn't hurt her any. Anyway, not by making her sick or anything.

Also while she was gone I snapped the catch on the door lock so it would be unlocked.

You know something? It wasn't

so bad having a cup of coffee with her. I mean this was the first time we were alone together and she had a very sweet way about her. But what the hell, I had my own problems.

When pretty soon she started to yawn and get sleepy-eyed, I got up and said good-bye and left.

I phoned Deuce Melody at his motel where there was a private phone in each cabin and told him everything was under control and to start out in fifteen minutes. I waited in a doorway across the street. Deuce showed in forty minutes, this being about what I'd figured it would take him. I watched him go into Esther Hunt's building, then got in my car and drove over to the block on which Lew Angel lived.

I didn't go up to his apartment. Went into the corner drugstore and dialed his number. By then it was eight-thirty. Augie Pitcher and the others would be there already for the meeting. Floyd was also still there, giving himself an alibi.

I made my voice sound thin and high like an old lady's. I said, "Is this Mr. Lew Angel?"

"That's right," Lew said. On the wire I heard the buzzing of voices of the others in the room with him.

"Mr. Angel," I said, "right this minute your girl, Esther Hunt, is carrying on something scandalous in her apartment with another man."

"You're nuts," he said.

"She looks like such a nice girl," I said in that cracked old voice, "but such carrying on. I mean all the time men coming and going in her apartment. Right this minute."

"Madam, who are you?"

"Never mind my name. I live in the same building with Esther Hunt, and I feel it my duty to let you know how she's two-timing you."

"Madam," he said, "You're a lousy liar."

I could hear it was quiet in the room now, like they were all listening. I said, "You can insult me all you want, young man, but you can go there and see for yourself."

And hung up.

I stayed in the phone booth a couple minutes more, then walked over to the front of the building like I hadn't a thing on my mind. Lew was coming out in a big hurry when I got there. This was my alibi.

"Willie," he said when he spotted me, "where's your car?"

"Right over there," I said.

"Drive me to Esther's place," he said.

He didn't say another word all the way, just sat in my car staring straight ahead. I'd hardly stopped the car in front of her house when he was out of it and running. At the street door he stopped and came back slowly.

"Maybe you'd better come up with me," he said.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"Maybe nothing," he said. "If there is—" He massaged his face all over with his hand. "I don't want to kill her. If I try to kill her, Willie, don't let me."

I'd just as soon not have gone up there with him, but what could I do? I tagged after him up the two flights of stairs. He stood at the door a little while, just stood there, then moved his hand to the bell. Didn't ring it though. Instead turned the knob and the door was unlocked on account of I'd made sure it would be. Both for Deuce Melody and for him.

He barged across the tiny living room and threw open the bedroom door. Then stopped dead like he'd come up against a wall.

I didn't go all the way with him, but I could see past his shoulder into the bedroom. Could see the bed and Deuce Melody sitting up in it in his underwear shirt. With a kind of silly grin on his face and the dimples punching deep holes in his cheeks.

Esther Hunt was in the bed with him. Out to the world like she'd been since before Deuce had come up and taken her dress off her and put her on the bed. She looked like she was peacefully asleep. Which was what she was, that powder I'd put in her coffee having done it.

The whole thing lasted two, three seconds. Lew didn't have to worry about killing anybody. I didn't have to worry either, though up to then this was what I'd been worried most about. Lew was too dead inside to do anything but turn around and walk out of there.

I drove him back to his house. He got out without saying goodnight. Maybe he didn't even know I was there.

I had one more thing to do. I drove to Deuce Melody's motel. He'd just got back from Esther Hunt's place. I paid him off and told him who the guy was who'd stood in the doorway. Though he hadn't known what Lew Angel looked like, he'd sure enough heard of him.

"My God, Willie," Deuce said, "you doublecrossed me. He'll cut my heart out."

"Not if you keep your trap shut," I said. "And if you don't lose time getting out of town."

"I knew the minute I lost my transmission in this dump there was nothing good about it," he said.

I went home to the cottage and got out a bottle. Pretty soon Floyd arrived. He was a happy man. He said when Lew got back to his apartment the first thing he did was kick out Augie Pitcher and the others that were waiting for him to go on with the meeting. He'd changed his mind about retiring. Which was no surprise to Floyd hearing this.

We shook hands and between us killed the bottle. Celebrating.

This was on account of we didn't know about you, bug. And you were here all the time.

So you know most of this anyway. Guess I'm on a talking jag. I always talk a lot when I'm nervous.

I found out about this afternoon, bug.

I came back to Lew's apartment from an errand and found Esther Hunt with him. School was still on, but she'd walked out on her kindergarten kids to try and explain about last night. Said it was all news to her, he thinking she'd been in bed with a guy, till she phoned him at lunchtime and heard it from him. Said all she knew was she'd fallen asleep very early and when she woke up she'd still been alone. Said there couldn't have been any guy with her.

A likely story.

"Throw the bitch out," Lew said to me.

I put my hand on her arm, but gentle-like. She threw her shoulders back and marched to the door with her face like a cake of ice. You know, I felt a little bit sorry for her. But what the hell!

"Serves me right, Willie," Lew said when I came back. "I was old enough to know all dames are tramps."

"Live and learn," I said.

A couple of hours later Allen W. McGoldrich, the D.A., came up to the apartment. He was carrying a kind of square case by the handle.

"To what do we owe this pleasure?" Lew said sarcastic-like.

"I have something here that will interest you," McGoldrich said.

He put the case on the table and took off the top. A tape recorder. We didn't say a thing watching him plug the cord into an outlet. Then he snapped a switch and the spools started turning and I was listening to my own voice. And Floyd's.

On the tape was everything I and Floyd had been talking about in our cottage the night I'd come home and told him Lew was going to get married and retire. How we were going to hire Deuce Melody and fix it so Lew would have no more use for Esther Hunt.

But you know. You were right in the wall listening, bug.

I mean you have to be in the wall on account of you're not anywhere else in this cottage. I'm no beginner. I know the cops and the D.A. are all the time bugging houses and apartments of guys like me and Lew Angel. One of my jobs is to go over Lew's apartment every few days to see if it's been bugged. Found a bug only last week behind a picture. Went over my cottage too, but found nothing.

This leaves inside the wall. Put there while I and Floyd were away. With electronics and all, these days you don't even need wires. A tape recorder can be a mile away recording every word we say as long as a bug is somewhere around.

And there was the tape on Lew's desk repeating all our words. And Lew just looking at me. And McGoldrich smiling that smile of his full of teeth.

McGoldrich was playing the old D.A. game. If you can't beat 'em, make 'em beat themselves. Get 'em to fighting each other. Afterward clean up the pieces. A smart cookie, that D.A.

Lew kept looking at me.

I was safe as long as McGoldrich was there. But after he left! Me, I had no hankering to hang around.

I slipped out of the apartment while the recorder was still going. I shouldn't have stopped. But I figured I had a little time to warn Floyd and pack my clothes and get the few bucks I had stashed away in the cellar.

Floyd got the hysterics when I told him. I was all packed and ready to go, but then I had Floyd on my hands. I couldn't get him to move, he was so scared. Should've left him, but what the hell! Then I was going to leave him, but when I opened the door the first car was pulling in among the trees a couple of hundred feet away.

Got me the box of cartridges out of my valise and my gun hasn't been out of my hand all the time I've been talking to you.

Talking is good for me when I'm like this. Quiets my nerves. Floyd is nobody to talk to. I can hear him bawling in the kitchen.

Now Lew is out there. I just saw him. And it'll be dark soon. There's not much time.

Of course the first thing they did was cut the telephone wire. So I can't call the cops for help. It's up to you, bug.

You got me into this. Now get me out.

I hope there's a man at the other end and not just a tape recorder. A man who heard me and will send help before it's too late.

Bug, for God's sake, are you listening?

# DIE, DIE, DIE!

BY ROSEMARY JOHNSTON

*It was dim and cool in Harry's Bar, peaceful and conducive to day-dreams . . . wonderful dreams of his mother-in-law. "That miserable old harpy." He smiled and ordered another drink.*

I HEAR this Khruschev has a taster," I said. "A guy that eats a bite or two of everything Khrushchev gets served. Drinks a swig of his champagne, vodka, whatever. All the kings in olden days had tasters, you know."

Harry, the bartender, clapped the lid with the spring around it over the shaker and dumped the whiskey sour into my glass. It came just to the top, like it always did. Not a drop went over, but you couldn't have put another drop in, either. Harry was a very good bartender.

"They must have to draft a guy for a job like that," Harry said. "That taster. Wow!" He shook his head slowly. "When you think of all the guys in this world out to get Mr. K. . . ."

"They say it's safe enough, when everybody knows the food is tasted, they don't try anything, see?"

"They'd have to draft me."

"Yes," I agreed. "Me too. Because I'll tell you what I think. I think, if a person really wanted to do it, he could. Know what I'd do? I'd pick out something that came in lumps. Shrimp, maybe. And I'd just put it in *one*, see. Chances are the taster wouldn't get that one. Then old Mr. K., he's talking away, arguing and all, and all of a sudden he bites into this *one*. And bingo! He's had it!"

Harry nodded approvingly. "That would do it, all right." He drifted down the bar to serve a young fellow and a girl who had just come in. It was cool and dim in Harry's, lit only by the lights that glowed through the tiers of liquor bottles that lined the wall behind the bar. You could forget the ulcer-making lunch at home. You could forget that the August sun had made the asphalt street outside feel like hot sponge when you walked on it. The newspaper guys had fried an egg on that street yesterday. The annual egg fry.

What that pavement could do to your feet, right through shoe leather! My soles smarted and burned, even now, even in the air-conditioned cool. What it would do to bare feet! I thought of my mother-in-law's feet, her ugly, dead-white swollen feet, the big toes turned sideways at an angle, the nails dry and yellow, nobbed with the yellow horn of old corns, the blue veins like contorted worms. I'd like to see her being marched down that street, slowly, bare-foot, two guys in uniforms like storm troopers holding her by the arms, seeing that she walked slow. I could just hear her, giving them a bad time at first, flaying them with that tongue of hers, saying things they wouldn't forget for a long time, about how they looked and their personalities and all.

One of them would snatch out his Luger. "I'm going to let this old dame have it," he would snarl. "She don't deserve to live."

The other one would grin, his lips curling wolfishly away from his teeth, his eyes dark and furious from her insults. "Put that thing away, pal," he would say. "It'll be better this way, remember?"

And then the pain would start getting at her, those feet would start swelling, sizzling maybe after a while, and she would be screaming, screaming, begging them to let her go, apologizing, screaming . . .

"Ready for another one, Mr. Adams?" Harry asked.

I started. "What? Oh, yes. Give me another one."

"A person couldn't be too careful, if somebody really wanted to poison them," I said. "It wouldn't have to be anything obvious, like special chocolates. It could be maybe something else in your vitamin capsule." I watched him slicing lemons in the quick efficient way he did things.

"Maybe a lemon!" I exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"You could put it in a lemon! Inject it with a hypodermic needle, say. Then this person would make some ice tea. Pour it over ice cubes. All safe. Then she'd cut this fresh lemon in two Squeeze a big dollop of juice into the tea, drink it down . . ." I sat thinking about all that. What would happen then.

"Your mother-in-law been bugging you again?" Harry asked.

"Just being her usual sweet self," I said, taking care with my speech. I'd had three, no, four drinks, since I dropped in here for something to settle my nerves after lunch. "Why do you ask about my mother-in-law, Harry?"

"Listen, Mr. Adams. I'd like to tell you something for your own good. OK?"

"OK. Shoot."

"Mr. Adams, I wouldn't go around talking like that. About poisoning people and all. Yesterday it was about how kitchen knives could slip. Last week it was about some dame getting caught in a wash wringer. Look, Mr. Adams. If the old lady was sitting right where you're sitting, all by herself, and got drunk and fell off the bar stool and broke her neck, there's a dozen people in this neighborhood would be willing to swear you got in here somehow and pushed her."

I cackled with laughter at the idea. Her lying there, draped over the brass rail, her head at a funny angle, her mouth shut for good. I shook my head regretfully. "It wouldn't happen that way, Harry. She wouldn't do any more than break a leg. Then she'd swear *you* pushed her, Harry, and she'd sue you for all you've got, and she'd take this bar away from you. It wouldn't be Harry's Bar any more. You know what she'd call it? *Mother's*!"

"Build me another drink, Harry. Want to watch you do it. Won't come in here any more, once *she* has it." As I pushed my glass towards him, somehow it fell over. He claimed I had enough, wouldn't sell me any more. Got nasty about it.

I started down the street to my office, but the heat got me. It was like walking in a big bright furnace. I began to feel funny, like the sidewalk was going to come up and hit me. All of a sudden I was draped over the mailbox in front of Jack Pearson's clothing store. The metal was hot, terribly hot. It burned me right through my suit, my arms, my belly, down my thighs. I let out a yell and pulled away. Jack came out and tried to steady me.

"You sick, Joe?" he asked anxiously. Then he said, "Oh. Been drinking your lunch. Here, I'll help you, Joe. You better get to your office and lie down for a while."

I tore away from him. "Hell with the office," I said. "I'm going home. Just remembered. Got a little something to attend to."

"You want I should call you a cab, Joe?" Jack asked, peering at me in a worried way. "You don't look to be in very good shape."

"Cab!" I joked. "You're an old maid, Jack. That's what you are. An old maid! I only live three blocks from here!"

I stepped out strong, knowing he was watching me. But after a while that heat got me again. I began to feel woozey. The block seemed to go on forever ahead of me, shimmering with heat, full of people who kept getting in my way. I kept wishing I was home already, flopped down on the sofa, Verna bringing me a nice long drink that tinkled with ice. Verna, looking at me with those beautiful dark eyes, talking to me in her nice low voice. Like heaven, like cool, quiet heaven, being with my lovely young wife, just the two of us.

While the old harpy was off getting the twenty dollar permanent wave in her dyed red hair. I could see her now, sitting there in the Bon Ton Beauty Shoppe, her hair all screwed up in those metal things, watching in the mirror with that sour, suspicious expression while the girls in white uniforms buzzed around, working on her. Then they'd start taking the metal stuff off, and they would all be squealing and hollering, and Mr. Cecil would come mincing in and maybe faint. And here as they take off the curlers, all her hair comes too! She's bald as a billiard ball!

I was walking along snickering about that, when suddenly all hell broke loose. People screamed, some guy roared in my ear, grabbed me by the arm and shoulder, yanked me backward, right off my feet. I swung on the guy, started fighting him.

He held me at arm's length, in some way so that I couldn't connect with my fists. "Now, Mr. Adams. Take it easy now, Mr. Adams," he kept saying. All of a sudden my eyes sort of focused. I could see it was only Dick Burgess, the traffic cop on Main Street.

I pulled away from him, panting, sweating, all mussed up. "What's idea?" I snarled at him. "Grabbing a man that way. Want to get hurt?"

"You sure went off like a firecracker," he said. "Mr. Adams, you all but got run over. You walked right out into the intersection against the traffic. If I hadn't grabbed you, that lady would have run you down."

I looked over my shoulder, vaguely remembering the squeal of brakes. A red Jaguar was stalled right in the middle of Main Street. The girl driving it had her head down over the wheel, like she was sick or something. Traffic was piling up, honking, and people were jamming in around Burgess and me, staring.

It made me mad. "What's the matter," I yelled at them. "You never saw anybody arrested before?"

Doc Palmer from the corner drug store came elbowing through the crowd.

"Hey, Doc," Burgess called, relieved. "Take care of our friend here, would you? No, he ain't hurt, and I ain't arresting him. He just shouldn't be walking the street by himself."

I put my arm over Doc Palmer's shoulder and let him help me into the drug store. "Nerves," I explained to him. "Nerves very bad. Home situation, you know."

"I know, Joe," he assured me, taking me into the back where he makes up his prescriptions. He did know, too. Doc and I are old buddies. He has problems, too. His wife has a disposition like my mother-in-law's. She's the one who owns the store, too. Inherited it from her father. She's older than Doc, and crazy jealous. Yes, he has his problems.

"How about some nice, hot, black coffee, Joe?" he asked me, after he sat me down on the leather sofa in his private office.

"Hot coffee? On a day like this? You must be nuts. Just let me rest a minute. Then I'll be getting home. My little wife's all alone. Her mother's away for the afternoon. I don't want Verna to get lonesome." I gave him a big wink.

He knew what I meant, all right. That was one of the things that bugged me most, the way my mother-in-law was always around the house. A fellow who's married to a pretty young wife like Verna, a fellow who's his own boss, can come home for lunch and all, well, he could have an enjoyable time for himself, afternoons. Only not with that old harpy sniffing around.

But Verna would get absolutely hysterical, if I so much as hinted that her mother should move out. "You want her around to make sure I behave myself, that I don't bother you all the time, like a husband has a right to," I accused her once. But I knew that wasn't so.

The old bag was Verna's mother, so naturally Verna looked at her differently from the way other people did. My own mother was a sort of strong-willed woman, too. She made it hot for me, sometimes, like when I'd think about getting married to some girl she didn't like. But if she were still living, she'd be making her home with us, too. It would never occur to my mother not to, and I certainly would never have told her to get out. I knew how Verna felt. My insides twisted, thinking about it. These old women . . . The power they have, the naked, terrible power. Just because at some moment long ago, some moment they have long since put out of mind, motherhood was imposed on them . . .

Doc had left me. Now he came bustling back with a glass, ice, and some soda. "If you won't have the coffee, how about a drink?" he asked. He got a bottle of bourbon out of his desk, mixed me a stiff

drink. I drank it down thirstily. He poured me another before I could say no.

"Why don't you lie down and rest for a while?" he suggested.

I let him talk me into that. "Feels good to lie down," I muttered, stretching out on the couch.

"You bet. I'll just pull the blinds and leave you, old boy. You'll feel swell, once you have a little rest."

I closed my eyes and I lay there for a while, but I didn't go to sleep. Everything seemed to be whirling, revolving in a sickening sort of way. The leather sofa felt slippery, insecure. I tried to hang on to keep from falling, but there was nothing to hang on to. I was clammy, sweaty, from lying on that leather.

I sat up at last, groaning. Drank the rest of the soda water. Thought about Verna, so cool, so beautiful. Marriage had done a lot for Verna. She wasn't the shy little stenographer she'd been when I first noticed her. One of the pretty young clerks I'd hired for the office, after my mother died.

Verna was engaged to a beatnik kind of fellow, then. A young jerk who wore a beard, who wrote silly poetry, who ran a tacky expresso joint, the one and only coffee house we ever had in this town. A fellow who didn't make enough to support a wife.

I used to make a point of driving by his tumble-down place in the Cadillac, when we'd be going to dinner at the home of one of my friends, or to spend the evening at the Country Club. Verna got the point, all right. She was crazy about the mink coat I'd bought her. She got a big bang out of buying clothes at the best shops, fixing herself up. I'd been a little nervy about introducing her to my friends, at first. But Verna caught on fast. In no time at all she looked classier than any of the debutantes from the Country Club set, girls who'd been to Eastern finishing schools.

I guess Verna was glad she'd married good old Joe Adams, all right. My wife has a position in this town. Mother's folks had owned a lot of property around here, and my mother had not only held on to it, she'd developed it. Yes, Verna could hold her head high, being the wife of the President of the Adams Realty Company.

Thinking about Verna made me feel stronger. I struggled to my feet, went out of Doc's office. There was nobody in the back room. I went out the rear door of the pharmacy. That way I could go down the alley, into the rear door of my apartment house, save walking in the sun all around the block. Just those few steps in the heat made me feel woozey again. I had to lean up against the wall for a while once I'd gotten inside my building, letting the air-conditioning cool me off.

I went down the hall to the lobby. Sam, the elevator man, was no-

where in sight, as usual. I leaned on the bell until he shuffled out from wherever it is that he hides. I chewed him out good. "I don't pay you for taking siestas," I told him. "Do you expect me to walk up two flights on a day like this?"

He gave me some excuse about helping a tenant carry in some luggage. "That's *your* story," I said. I leaned against the elevator wall. When we got to my floor, it took me a minute to straighten up. He ran that elevator very fast.

"Can I help you to your apartment?" he asked me, taking hold of my arm.

I yanked away from him. "Take your dirty hands off me!" I said.

"Yes, *sir*," he muttered, slamming the door right on my heels.

It made me mad. I put my back against the wall, thinking about him in that elevator. The cables snapping, him throwing up his arms, his eyeballs rolling, screaming as he went down, down, down . . . I giggled. "Not the elevator, Joe, old boy," I told myself. "Remember, you *own* this building."

My door was locked. I rattled at it a few times, got out my key, scratched around a bit, finally got the door open. "Verna!" I called as I stumbled in.

I heard some movement behind me, turned around. "Oh, no!" I screamed. "No, don't!" But something solid caught me right on the jaw. My head seemed to explode. I had a sensation of falling.

When I came to I was lying on the floor. It hurt to open my eyes. My head was aching so bad I was whimpering. When I tried to move, I seemed to be clutching something heavy in my hand. I focused on it, to see what it was. It was one of my set of bronze horses that I used for book-ends. I stared at it, trying to figure out why I had it. Moaning, I let loose of it, tried to sit up. Stirring around made me sick as a dog. I just made it into the bathroom.

After a while I dunked my head in cold water, took some aspirins. I studied the swelling on my chin, trying to fit the pieces together. Then I thought of something. Something that I'd seen as I was sitting up, just as the nausea hit me. I stood there, holding on to the washbasin, telling myself that I had to be wrong. I hadn't really seen anything, any *body* lying there on the floor at my feet.

I don't know how long it was that I stood there, how long before I finally forced myself to go back to the living room. It was true, all right. My mother-in-law was lying right there where I remembered, stretched out on her face beside the telphone stand. I went over, knelt down beside her, picked up her limp wrist, let it drop hastily. My God, she was already getting cold! Her head was turned away from me, but there was blood on the floor around it. I didn't want to look any farther.

I staggered back to the sofa, sat

down shivering. Details started coming back to me, about what had happened when I came into the room. But I still couldn't understand any of this. I knew who hit me, all right. I had seen him plain. It was my good friend, Doc Palmer! And Verna had been there, too, right behind him, looking very white and strange.

I couldn't figure it out. Even when it dawned on me what must have happened, I just couldn't take it in. Verna and Doc! I couldn't believe it. Not that I'd put it past Doc, in a way. I mean, we were *friends*. I didn't think he'd do it to me. But I know Doc is a chaser.

But Verna! I couldn't imagine her with Doc. This was all wrong. Phoney, wrong, impossible. This had to be one of those things I think of, one of those day-dreams of mine. But there was my mother-in-law. The deed had been done, and Doc had done it. I had to accept the fact. Doc had been here with Verna, thinking that I was asleep back there in his office. *She* had come in, had found them. There'd been a row. I could picture that. She had probably threatened to tell that wife of Doc's, maybe even had picked up the phone. He let her have it. Then I had come in . . .

I tried to figure what I should do. The police! I would have to call the police.

"My God, that horse!" I thought in sudden horror. After he had hit me with it, he had put it into my hand! My fingerprints were all over it!

I was crouched by the corpse, scouring frantically at the murder weapon with my pocket handkerchief, when they all burst in on me. It was very confusing. There were so many of them. Burgess, the cop. Sam, with his eyeballs bugging out. Verna, clutching a big bag of groceries and screaming. And *Doc*.

"I knew there was something wrong," Doc was telling the cop, speaking very loud and fast. "He was acting very strange—making threats, terrible threats. I thought he went to sleep—that he was sleeping off his drunk in my office. I saw Mrs. Adams go by with her groceries, so I called her in. I thought the two of us could get him home. But he was gone! I got scared, all of a sudden. I thought you'd better come along with us, just in case. And I was right. My God! I was right!"

I was so mad, I went for him with the horse. "He did it! He killed her!" I kept yelling as Sam and Burgess jumped me, held me down, put handcuffs on me.

Do you know, nobody believed my story! Not even my lawyer. Oh, he went through the motions. He hired some expensive detectives to check on Verna and Doc. They couldn't pick up a whiff of gossip connecting them. Verna had been seen by a score of people, pushing a basket around the local supermar-

ket at the approximate time of the murder. Doc Palmer's hired help were positive he'd been in the store all afternoon, except when he'd been in his office, getting me settled down.

I'd told Jack Pearson, the clothier, that I was going home to attend to some business. Harry, the bartender, testified that I'd been threatening to kill my mother-in-law for some time. Doc Palmer testified that I'd told him that I was really going to do it this time, that I was going to kill the old bat.

Verna's testimony really clinched it. What she said, and the way she said it. We were divorced by then, of course, but it was obvious she was terribly reluctant to put the noose around my neck. But the prosecutor forced her to admit that the beauty shop had called to cancel her mother's appointment *while I was still home, eating lunch*. That I knew that she, Verna, would be out shopping. That I knew that her mother would be home alone.

After Verna's testimony, I began to wonder myself if I had done it. I was so sure that I had accurately remembered what went on that afternoon. But maybe something had slipped a cog in my mind. The only thing I could cling to, the only way I could keep hold of my sanity, was the fact that I could not visualize any discharge of violence. Even drunk as I was, that deed would have branded itself into my consciousness.

The jury was convinced. They brought in a verdict of guilty. I got twenty years. My lawyer said I was lucky.

The only person who believed my story about Doc and Verna was Doc's wife. I didn't even tell it on the stand, by the way. My lawyer decided I'd better not testify. He said I'd make a poor witness, and that making a completely unsupported statement like that about my wife would prejudice the jury! By that time in my trial I wasn't even sure myself what I had seen. I don't believe it would have made much difference, anyhow.

But Doc's wife must have believed me. She divorced him right after the murder. Only she named a little blond clerk at the store as corespondent, and made it stick, too.

Verna came to see me at the jail, one time, just before I was taken to the State Prison to begin my term. My last appeal had been turned down. Verna's divorce was final, with a settlement that had pretty well cleaned me out. There was only one bit of unfinished business.

"Thank you for coming," I told her, through the wire netting that separated us. "You look very beautiful." She did, too. Young, and sleek, and expensive. She was wearing the mink coat, and her shining dark hair was wrapped around her head in some complicated way. Her black dress was that plain, figure-

hugging kind that costs so much money, and she had on the diamond clip I'd bought her.

"Your lawyer said you had to see me," she stated.

"Verna, I can't go up there without *knowing*," I pleaded with her. "What really happened that day?"

"What do you mean, what really happened?"

"Verna, I wasn't that drunk. I *know* that Doc was there, when I went into that room. I know that you were there. I *remember* what happened. I've got to know *why*. Verna, were you having an affair with Doc?

"With that old goat?" Her nostrils flared with disgust. "Give me credit for better taste!"

I felt a flood of relief. One of the worst things I had had to face, among all the adjustments I was having to make, was the idea of Doc with Verna. Of the guy enjoying *my* wife, on *my* money, while I was in jail for *his* crime.

"But then *why?*" I kept on. "Why did it happen?"

"You really want to know?" She looked around to be sure we were not overheard. Her eyes sparkled as if with joy—a kind of malicious joy. "Well, I'll tell you."

"Doc killed her, all right. Here's what really happened. They called to cancel Mother's appointment just *after* you left. Mr. Cecil had been overcome by the heat. So we did the dishes, watched some television. Then Mother got some washing together and took it down to the laundry machine in the basement. While she was gone, Doc Palmer came steaming in. He had some wild idea that we'd be alone for the afternoon, and he was going to make the most of it. That old creep had been giving me the eye ever since we moved into the neighborhood, but I'd never so much as give him the time of day. I still can't figure why he thought I would.

"So he was making himself very objectionable, and I was fighting him off. At that point Mother came in. Well, there was quite a scene."

"Yes," I said. "I imagine there was."

"She just about raised the roof. First she was going to call the police. Then she said, no, she would call his wife. His wife would see that he paid for this, without involving us all in open scandal. She picked up the telephone to call his wife. It was then that he snatched up the bronze horse, hit her with it." She grimaced, stopped, recalling the moment.

"Then what happened?" I pursued.

"Well, after a while we knew that she was dead. We were just standing there, sort of in shock, when we heard you at the door. Then you came in, and he hit you."

"He thought fast, your friend. He saw at once how it could be blamed on you. He planned it all out in an instant. We went down the back stairs. I went to the super-

market, acted like I'd been there for some time. He went back to his store. Only a few minutes had gone by, really, from the time he'd left. Nobody'd missed him. Our alibis stood up fine. Then we went back and discovered the crime, with a policeman as a witness. You played your part fine, Joe. We found you wiping off the fingerprints. You tried to use the murder weapon again on an innocent bystander, accused him of the crime, acted so crazy nobody believed a word you said."

"But *why,* Verna? Why did you back him up, let him get away scot free, after he killed your mother? I can see how you might have had to go along with his plans, up in the apartment. You were in fear of your life. But once you'd gotten away, why didn't you go for the police? Everyone would have believed you. *I* would have. You and Doc as lovers—it never made sense to me, even when I was forced to think it. Did he threaten you?"

She leaned back gracefully, regarded me with insolent amusement. "You haven't gotten the picture yet, have you, Joe," she purred. "Look at it from my point of view. If I'd called the cops on Doc, sure, he'd be sitting where you are now. And I'd still be married to *you.*"

She bent toward me, her lovely young face close to the wire. Fury contorted that face, and hate, and a hot resentment that made me shrink back in sudden shame. "The things you did to me, you and Mother!" she whispered. "She made me marry you, and you know she did, you nasty, rich old man. When I was just a kid. When I was scared and insecure and thought that the man I loved didn't want me. I was freed from *her,* that day. I saw a chance to be free from you, too. So I took it. And I won. I'm free!"

She stood up, shrugged into her mink, gathered up her purse and gloves. The interview was over. "I'm marrying Charlie next week," she told me as she left.

I couldn't think at first who Charlie was. Then it came to me. The beatnik fellow, of course. Verna's first love.

I suppose I should hate Verna. She certainly ruined me. But somehow I can't. All my life I'd hated people. People who annoyed me, who insulted me. Some people who said terrible things to me, destroyed the most precious thing a man can have, his respect for his own manhood. I punished those people in my fantasies. But that was all I ever did. I never had the guts to do anything more.

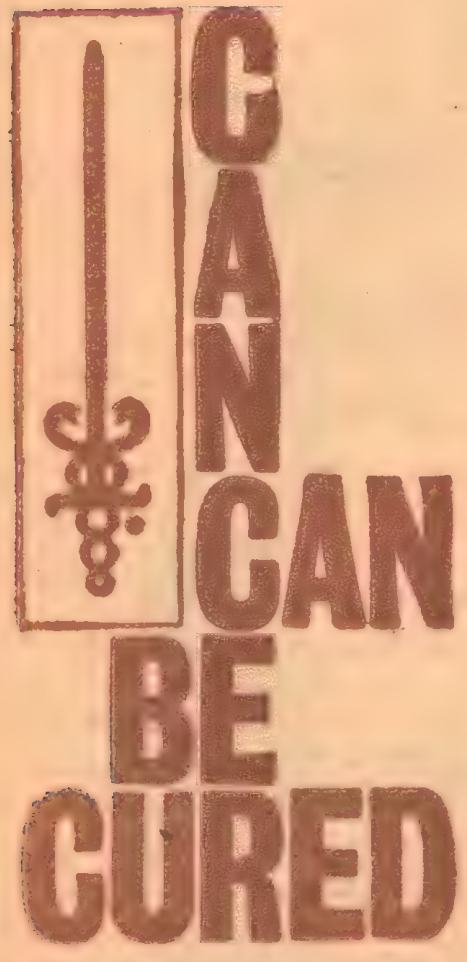
Verna is really a lot like me. For a long time, I guess, she was living a life she didn't much like. She probably had her dreams about being free, her own master, with the money and the things money buys, that I'd taught her to need.

In a split second she had a chance to make her dreams come true. It

was a long shot. A very risky gamble. If there'd been any tenants home that afternoon who'd heard the uproar in our apartment. If anybody had seen her or Doc. If one thing had gone wrong, she'd have been in terrible trouble.

It wasn't easy for her on that witness stand, either, deliberately swearing my life away. It had been a painful, pitiful thing to watch. But she had done it.

She fell into a situation like the ones I'm always setting up, in my mind. She had the nerve to carry through. She *acted*. That's why I can't find it in my heart to hate her. The fact is, I admire Verna.

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# THE BIG HAUL

*Womack kept the rig rolling at sixty-five. He fought down the urge to drive faster. He couldn't risk being stopped by a cop. Not now. Not with the load he was carrying.*

*A Novelette*

**BY**

**ROBERT PAGE JONES**

IT HAD begun to rain when he picked up Highway 77 outside of Friersville. Now, nearly a hundred and fifty miles west, water rattled down on the tomblike cab of the big tractor like showers of hail.

The driver—his name was Johnny Womack—chewed at a sandwich. He had nearly white hair, cropped close to his head like fine toothbrush bristles, but his face was young. The jaw was lean and hard, faintly corded with muscle. He had dark gray eyes. They squinted against the glare of an onrushing car. Cursing softly under his breath, he cut his speed back to forty, left it at that after the car had passed. He was satisfied to be mak-

ing even forty through the drifting sheets of water.

The big rig moved well. It was nearly seven years old, one of the old stick-shift jobs, with ten forward gears—but it was dependable. And it was nearly his.

If he didn't miss any more payments.

He thought about the empty van in back. His lips made a bitter expression. He had hauled a full load of cotton to Denver, hoping to get some kind of load for the trip back to El Centro, without success. It had been a bad deal from the start. The cotton run hadn't paid well and he had been forced to come back empty.

And there was Emma. This would be the first time in ten years that he wouldn't be returning to her. Emma. His lips made the bitter expression again. Not that he blamed her. Ten years is a long time to hang around while your husband is on the road—especially with bills coming in faster than money. Even when two people are in love, it's no good without money. And he knew now, had known ever since she ran out on him, that she hadn't been in love with him—not really in love.

He took another bite of sandwich and put the uneaten portion on the seat beside him. He felt let down and depressed. His face half bitter, half angry, he shook his head. The thought slipped in and out of his mind that he had felt let down and depressed for most of his life.

He rolled on, still knocking off forty, headlights stuck out before him like the probing antenna of a giant bug. The rig was running low on gas. He would reach Stanton around midnight and he could tank up there. Maybe. The oil company had let his credit card expire—he owed them nearly three hundred bucks—and he had only a few dollars left in his pocket.

Shifting hands on the wheel, he groped under the dash for the big .45 suspended there from metal clips. He had bought the gun for protection on long overnight hauls. Emma had wanted him to have it. He hefted it in his hand. The metal gleamed in the glow from the dashlights. He remembered the first time he had held a gun. A long time ago. He had been a little boy. He had picked it off the floor by the body of his father.

Shrugging, as if to resolve some problem that bothered him, he hefted the gun and then put it back in the clips.

He would hock it, if he had to, or sell it. That would be better than using it. He had spent part of his youth in a reform school. It had taught him something. If he ever used a gun, it would be for something big. Something really big. Like a million dollars.

He laughed out loud. A million bucks was more money than there was in the world.

## 2.

There were three of them. One was a soldier. He wore his tailored summer gabardines with the deliberate casualness of one who could never quite accustom himself to army discipline. The gabardines were obviously of expensive quality. They were the kind that the officers wear. But the shirt bore no insignia of rank—only the collar brass of an enlisted man.

He was younger than the others. His narrow, colorless face was heavily pockmarked, as if the skin had been gnawed by a rodent. He said softly, "Quit sweating, Wibber."

"Who's sweating?" The man called Wibber mopped at his face. He was very fat. He lay sprawled on his back on the cheap hotel room bed, perspiration-stained Western hat perched on his mountainous stomach, looking straight at the ceiling. "I just don't want us to screw up, that's all. I know this town. I know how they'll react to a heist like this. It'll be the biggest thing ever hit this place . . . and I don't aim to get caught in the middle."

"You don't know nothing. None of you know nothing. If you did, you wouldn't be scrabbling for peanuts in a penny-ante berg like this." The soldier—his name was Sammy Travis—reached for his cigarettes. His fingers were slim and white, almost like the fingers of a woman, only the tips were stained dark yellow with nicotine. He got to his feet and said tersely, "What time is it?"

The third man—his name was Bernie White—looked at his watch. He had the dirt-clogged nails and blunted fingers of a man who works with engines. He said, "Twenty-seven after."

"Three minutes," Travis said.

Wibber moaned softly and swung his feet to the floor. The bedspread was sweat-sopped where his body had lain. He said, "How can you guys stand it?"

Travis said, "Eh?"

"How can you stand it?"

"Stand what?"

"The heat?"

White said, "You should take off some of that blubber. It ain't hot."

Travis didn't answer. He went to the window and pulled back the drapes. Sunlight came in. What might have been a smile pulled at his lips as he said, "Right on schedule."

Wibber and White joined him at the window. For exactly four minutes they watched something that was going on in the street four floors below. Then, without speaking, Travis closed the drapes and walked to the dresser. He took out a half pint of whiskey and divided it equally into three glasses. When he had distributed the glasses, he sat down in a chair and lit a cigarette.

Travis' glass was empty and he

was on his third cigarette when the phone rang. Before lifting the receiver he looked at White. "Time?"

White said, his voice edgy, "Eleven after."

"Exactly thirty-seven minutes." Travis let the phone ring three times, lifted the receiver, then replaced it without talking into it. The ringing stopped. He said purposefully, "All right. Let's try to get it straight in our minds."

"We've checked the timing on every run for the past three months, and it's consistent. That's important. Perfect timing is the difference between the right way or wrong way of doing a thing." Travis grinned acidly. "That's one of the things they taught me in the Army."

"I ain't convinced." Wibber grunted on the bed. "Knocking off an armored car ain't like maneuvers. Christ, every successful armored car heist in history has been an inside job, and we ain't on the inside."

"And that ain't an armored car." Travis lit a cigarette from the stub in his hand. The gesture was quick, nervous. "It's a 1938 klunker that's about to rust off its axels. Hell, if it wasn't for the Army payroll, it'd be carrying nothing but cash receipts from the Saturday night Bijou."

Wibber grunted, fanned his face with his hat.

Travis said, "Now then. Here are some of the things we know. The semi-monthly payroll for the base, discounting civilian employees who're paid by check, is about seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Cash. Beautiful green cash. Almost all of it in small bills."

"How do you know?" Wibber stopped fanning.

White said, "Wibber, weren't you ever in the Army?"

"What if I wasn't?" Wibber fanned. "What's so goddamned hot about the Army?"

"If you were," Travis interrupted, "you'd know something. Three quarters of a million, divided into a couple of thousand pay envelopes, ain't much. Twenties, mostly, except for some fifties they use for the officers."

Travis laughed softly at his own humor. "The money is transferred to the base by the local armored transport service. Big deal. Three quarters of a million clams floating around in a klunker that would fall apart if you leaned on it. The trip from the bank to the base takes thirty-seven minutes. Add four minutes at each end for transfering the dough and it gives us exactly forty-five minutes from vault to vault. Forty-five minutes to knock this hick town on its ear."

Wibber said, "You've worked on the car, Bernie. What do you think?"

"It's old. But it's tough." White looked at Travis. "We won't be able to crack it open. If we're going to stand any chance at all, we'll have

to think our way in."

"Just like that, huh?" Wibber mopped his face again, eyes still pinned on the ceiling. "There are two security guards to handle the transfer at the bank—three, counting the regular bank guard—and the whole U.S.Army is on hand to unload. What do you figure they're gonna be doing while we clean house?"

"So we don't hit 'em during the transfer," Travis said quietly. "We wait until they're out on the road. Then—"

"One thing that's still bothering me," White broke in. He stabbed his finger at a red line on the road-map spread between Wibber's feet. "Route 77 is the only road in or out of Valerie. A hundred and eighty miles to the California border, nearly the same distance to the nearest town east, and nothing but sand in between. Assuming we figure a way to make the heist . . . how do we get the dough out of the state?"

Travis pulled back the curtain and looked down into the street again, at the busy sidewalk in front of the First Trust and Savings Bank of Valerie, where less than an hour before he had watched canvas sacks containing seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars loaded into an armored car.

He stood at the window for several minutes. When he turned to look at the others his face was expressionless. He half closed his eyes as he said, "Working out the details is my problem. You two just make sure you're ready to go . . . two weeks from today."

3.

Bernie White slammed closed the hood of the big tractor, motioned for Womack to cut the engine, and walked around by the pumps.

"Sounds like maybe you got a bent rod," he said.

Womack cursed softly. "You sure?"

"Nope." White shifted a wad of something in his mouth. "I'll have to get inside and take a look."

"How long will that take?"

White shrugged. He mopped his face and neck. "Can't tell. I'm the regular mechanic, but the boss is off today, sick; so I've got to handle the pumps, too. Depends on how many people come in for gas. Hour, maybe."

"Okay."

"You in a hurry?"

"Yeah." Womack was in no particular hurry, but he didn't want to be stuck in this burg any longer than was absolutely necessary, not with heat shimmering up out of the pavement like steam in a Turkish bath. He climbed down out of the tractor and said, "Where can I drink a beer and cool off?"

"Frank's Place is about as cool as any." White pointed a puffy, freckled forearm. "It's about two blocks down the main drag. Can't miss it. You want I should come and get

you as soon as I take a look?"

"Yeah. If I'm not back by then, you come and get me."

White watched the big truck driver walk down Mainstreet toward Frank's Place and thought how good a beer would taste. Then he went in by the grease rack for his tools. An armored car—PHILLIPS ARMORED TRANSPORT SERVICE said the sign on the side panels—was up on the rack.

White moistened his lips and looked for a long moment at the truck. They brought it in every week to be serviced and, although White had only worked at the garage for four months, he knew it like the back of his hand.

It was an old model, squat and ugly, like some thick-skinned prehistoric animal, but one which, if you could ever slit open its belly, would spew forth three quarters of a million clams.

In spite of the heat, White was whistling a happy tune when he walked back outside to work on the rig.

## 4.

Frank's Place may have been as cool as any, Womack thought—but that wasn't very cool.

It was a combination bar and cafe like a dozen Womack had stopped at along Route 77 in Arizona. The shades had been drawn in a vain attempt to keep out the heat. The only light was from imitation candles, made even more feeble by cheap cardboard shades, on the bar and in the booths along one side. Womack sat in a booth. The seats were covered with imitation leather, decorated with livestock brands, like the old West.

A thin-faced guy in a white apron sat on one of the bar stools reading a newspaper. He was slightly built, about forty-five, with protruding shoulder blades.

The only other person in the place was a girl. Womack couldn't help thinking that she didn't belong there. That is, she looked like she should have been at the bar in some swanky New York hotel, instead of in this hick-town greasy-spoon.

She was sitting at the far end of the bar, wearing an obviously expensive cocktail dress, absently twirling a frosted glass. The glass was fully nine inches tall. It contained a smoky, pink-colored liquid. Her dress was green, with thin, rhine-stone-covered halter straps that looked as if they might snap under the strain. She wore expensive shoes, separated from the dress by what looked like yards of sexily-curved legs.

The skinny guy with the apron came over and stood disinterestedly while Womack glanced at the menu.

"Soup. And a beer."

"What kind of beer?"

"Any kind. Hamm's."

"Chicken or split pea?"

"Chicken. And some crackers."

He took a pad from his pocket and wrote on it. "Chicken. You want the Southern fried steak or raviolli?"

"Just the soup."

Tight Face looked at him disgustedly. "You want dessert?"

"No."

Womack grabbed a handful of sugar cubes and stuffed them into his pocket. The way his money was holding out, the sugar might be his only other meal between Valerie and El Centro. If he ever made El Centro. He wondered how serious the trouble with his rig was . . .

He lit a cigarette and looked at the girl. She had swung around on the stool and was gazing at him openly, elbow on the bar, cheek resting in the palm of her hand. Like the dress, and the fancy beehive hairdo, she looked expensive. Too expensive. He'd never been able to afford dames like that. With a faint smile he realized that he hadn't even been able to afford Emma—and she had come pretty cheap. Emma. He wondered how long the little bitch had been playing around while he was on the road . . .

The girl got off the stool and crossed the room to the juke box. It was still light out, but she obviously had been drinking for most of the afternoon. She handled her body provocatively, like a stripper on a stage, accentuating the rising full breasts and narrow waist and rounded hips. She selected an Ella Fitzgerald record and went back to the bar. While she listened, she continued to look at Womack. It made him uncomfortable. Before the record was over she took her glass and slid into the seat opposite him.

She fumbled in her purse for a cigarette, put one in her mouth, and looked expectantly at him. He lit it.

"That stool wasn't very comfortable," she said softly. "Do you mind?"

"No." He answered guardedly. He had forgotten how stupid this sort of thing could be.

"Car trouble?"

"Not exactly."

"Truck trouble, then."

"How'd you guess?"

"Why else would anyone stop in Valerie?"

Womack glanced around, thankful for the diversion. "So this is Valerie."

"Uh-huh. Practically all of it . . . unless you like Western movies." She closed her eyes, opened them, let them roam flirtatiously over his face. The look triggered a powerful response from somewhere deep down inside of him . . .

*Christ,* he thought. *She oozes sex like a toothpaste tube. Those eyes, that hair, those breasts . . .*

"On your way to L.A.?" she asked.

"El Centro."

"In a hurry to get across the desert, I'll bet."

"Uh-huh." His soup and beer arrived. He broke open the crackers and sat slurping the soup, thankful for something to do. He was beginning to feel kind of foolish.

"That's too bad," she said pointedly. She reached over and tugged absently at the curled white hairs on the back of his hand. "If you were going to be around for awhile I could show you the town. What there is of it."

Womack looked at her. He felt the response again . . .

She smiled, gave him a searching look with slanted, green-tinted eyes. She reminded him somehow of Emma, except that she had nearly-black hair, while Emma was a blonde. But the figure was the same, full and ripe-breasted, yet softly female.

He said, "Maybe next time."

"You mean next time your truck breaks down." She laughed over her drink. Somehow she managed to make even holding a glass look sexy. She was obviously a fun-loving girl with fun-loving ideas stuck in a no-fun town.

Womack looked at his soup. He had to force himself to eat. Under different circumstances a beautiful bundle like this would have had him dusting off a pitch. But, even though this one seemed willing, there was nothing in it for him. Not with the way things were—with a few dollars in cash and a hand full of sugar cubes between him and El Centro.

Womack drank the top off his beer.

She lifted her own glass and said, "What'll we drink to?"

"Anything you say."

"Okay." She beamed. "I'll drink to you and you drink to me. Okay?"

"Sure." He took another swallow of his beer.

She put down her glass.

"You act like you've got a wife in El Centro."

"You could call it that—" Emma was no wife, no wife at all. Not anymore. He didn't even know whether she was in El Centro or not.

"Is she pretty?"

"I guess she's okay." He began chasing a chunk of chicken. It was lousy soup.

"Prettier than me?"

Her voice was so low that Womack didn't understand the words. But there was something in her tone that made him lift his gaze from the soup. He looked at her.

She was leaning forward, elbows on the table, offering him an unimpeded look down the front of her dress. It was worth the look. He had known that it would be.

"Well," she said lazily. The alchohol had made her voice husky. "Is she?"

## 5.

Womack found himself thinking bleakly of Emma. How stupid

could a guy be? There were other dames—like the one sitting opposite him. There had *been* other dames. But not this time. Not with his truck on the blink and only a few bucks in his pocket. He said, "Listen. You're a beautiful girl. You don't have to prove that to me."

"I was beginning to wonder—"

"Under different circumstances you'd have me falling all over my feet, but under different circumstances you wouldn't even know I was alive, all of which goes to prove something."

"What"

"That Valerie probably is even duller than it looks." He drank some of his beer. He felt suddenly relieved—and disappointed. "What you need, kid, is a change of scenery. Buy a ticket on a bus. Go somewhere—anywhere—it doesn't make any difference. Go where the bright lights are. Win a beauty contest and get in the movies—"

"I've been in the movies," she said acidly. She got to her feet, stood smoothing the dress over her hips, picked up her drink. She smiled, but the warmth was no longer there. "Well, have a nice trip . . . to El Centro."

She turned, wobbling slightly, and headed back toward the bar.

"Wait—" Womack half rose to his own feet, settled back down with his beer, suddenly contented to let things ride.

He signaled for the waiter, making a mental calculation of how much he owed, and dug a couple of bills from his pocket. He was still waiting for his change when the man from the garage came in.

Bernie White acknowledged Womack with a nod, strode straight to the bar, and ordered a beer. Perspiration gleamed on his face. He downed the beer with one tilt of the glass, Adam's apple working, then sat down opposite Womack in the booth. There was beer foam on his lip. He said, "How long did you drive with the rod bent?"

"How the hell do I know?"

"Well, don't make no difference now."

"It's bad, eh?"

"Pretty bad." He swiped at the foam with his hand. "She been pulling hard on the grades?"

"No. No worse than usual."

"Well, I can fix 'er. But it's going to take a couple of days to get 'er running good."

"How much?"

White took out a scrap of grease-smeared paper with some writing on it. "Got it figured right here. Parts and labor should run you around a hundred and seventy-five bucks. Of course, that's just an estimate, but I always figure kind of heavy."

Womack sat there, thinking absurdly to himself, *it might as well be a hundred and seventy-five thousand. Because, either way, I ain't got a chance in hell of getting my hands on the dough.*

"Okay." Womack had no choice. "Fix her up."

"Don't worry." White got to his feet. "I'll have her running sweet as sugar."

Womack picked up his change and made another mental calculation. With the cash remaining in his pocket, and if he also picked up the dime he'd left as a tip, he would be worth exactly twenty-three dollars.

He left the dime where it was. It wouldn't do him any good. Neither would the twenty dollars remaining in his pocket. During the next couple of days, if he was to get his truck back to El Centro, he would have to figure a way to get his hands on some real dough. In the meantime, he could sleep in the rig.

Womack was about to follow White outside, when he noticed the girl again. She really had a sensational body. He thought about the way her breasts had looked inside the halter of her gown, startlingly white and pink-tipped, and a faint warning bell sounded down inside his stomach somewhere.

He didn't heed the warning.

## 6.

They had a few drinks together at the bar, beer and whatever it was she was drinking, while the bartender fed an occasional nickel into the jukebox. They were his only customers and he apparently wanted to keep them around.

At exactly seven o'clock he turned on the television screen high up over the bar. The fights were on. Womack found that he could barely hear the sound over the blare of the jukebox. He didn't care. You don't have to hear the fights. But it seemed strange to see the two men pawing at each other to the strains of the *Missouri Waltz*.

Womack gradually became engrossed. During one of the frequent commercials he turned his head slightly to look at the girl sitting next to him. Since joining her at the bar, they had said very little, just small talk. Her name was Lila. That much she had told him. Lila, a slender, dark-haired stranger with slanting green eyes and a sensuous mouth.

She stared up into his face. There was something strange about her, something different. Every word he had said, no matter how trivial, she had listened to attentively. It was as if it was important to her to have someone to talk to. And, yet, she had seemed contented to just sit while he watched the fights.

Womack took a swallow of beer and said, "You like the fights?"

Before she could answer, their attention was diverted by a soldier entering from the street. He was short and stocky, with damp sweat-spots under his arms and beneath his belt. He looked directly at Womack and the girl, as if he were using them to adjust his eyes to the reddish glow within the bar, then

sat down on one of the stools. When he had paid for his beer he fished a dime from the change on the wet-stained bar and walked back to an inside phone booth in the rear.

Womack looked at the girl once more. Her face was very white, her eyes wide and frightened, and he wondered if she was going to be sick. He said, "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She sipped her drink. "It's the heat. It makes me a little woozy at times."

"Would you like to go somewhere else?"

She started to speak and hesitated—

"Some place where we can get a little air. It'll do you good."

"I thought you wanted to watch the fights."

"They're a couple of pugs."

"There's a place out on the highway . . . the *Blue Note*. They only have a band on Saturdays . . . but there's a dance floor and a jukebox. We could drive out there."

"No wheels." Womack grinned. "Isn't there someplace close?"

Lila nodded. "No. But we can take my car."

"Okay. Drink up."

They finished their drinks, had a final round for the road, then got to their feet. Womack felt a pleasant constriction building in his throat. He was dimly aware that he was getting drunk. He decided that he didn't give a damn.

He settled the bill and followed her outside and down the street to her car. It was a new Thunderbird convertible, white, with the top down. Somehow the car didn't surprise him. It went with the expensive dress and the forty dollar shoes and the sophisticated-sounding sigh she exhaled as she pressed close beside him.

Womack heard the warning bell again. It sounded in his stomach, causing the muscles there to tighten. It was all wrong somehow. A girl with this much class . . .

He said, "Some rig."

"It's all mine."

"Lucky girl."

She laughed. "Would you like to drive it?"

Womack opened the door for her and helped her in, then walked around and slid under the wheel. When he pulled away from the curb he could feel the tremendous, silent power under the hood. It never failed to give him a thrill.

Lila edged closer to him. Her shoulder touched his. The wind pulled at her skirt and rippled the halter of her gown, exposing flashes of milky flesh, startlingly white against the dark tones of her arms and shoulders. Her hair brushed his face. It had a smell of wild flowers in it.

There was not much traffic on the road, only an occasional car, and the road was straight. Womack put his foot down hard on the accelerator. The car lept forward.

Lila laughed softly. There was excitement in her voice as she said,

"Not too fast, Johnny."

He let the needle hover at eighty. The hell with it. He felt good.

He glanced into the rear-view mirror once, noticed a set of headlights and wondered vaguely why the car behind them was following so close, then dismissed it from his mind.

He continued out Route 77 to a point where it intersected with a secondary county road. Near the intersection were a couple of acres of gravel-covered land with a shoddy motel and a combined gas station and cafe. A sputtering neon light alternately blinked *The Blue Note* . . . GAS . . . *The Blue Note* . . . GAS . . .

Womack swung the Thunderbird onto the parking lot, gravel spraying the underside of the fenders, and stopped beneath the drooping branches of a tree that grew between the motel and the cafe. As he got out he noticed that the car he had seen in the rear-view mirror was stopping also.

It wasn't until the car's doors swung open that Womack saw the sheriff's star painted on one of them. The two men who got out and started toward him were strangers. One was big and burly, with a thick neck and shoulders, the other nearly as tall but lighter and small-boned. They were obviously county deputies. Despite the boots, and the big campaign hats, they lacked the sharpness of state troopers.

The smaller of the two said, "Hold it, Mister."

There was no doubt about it now. They had been following him. Womack wondered why. He had had the Thunderbird over eighty on the straightaways, but there had been a minimum of traffic, and there was no posted limit. What bothered him now was the fact that he had been drinking.

Stuffing a cigarette in his mouth, to disguise the alchohol on his breath, Womack walked forward to meet them. Lila watched him from the car. Even in the dim light, Womack could see that her face had gone white again.

The deputies halted directly in front of him. The big one shoved his hat away from his forehead, wiped at his face with a balled handkerchief, and smiled through rotten teeth.

Then, before Womack could return the smile, they began beating him with their fists.

## 7.

A half-forgotten recollection of his childhood flashed quickly across Womack's mind. He had stood this way many times before, on the streets of New York's West Side tenement section, while fists lashed out at his face. Nothing had changed. Someone was trying to hurt him and he knew only one thing: fight back, fight until he no longer had the strength to lift his

arms. He staggered backward. A fist crashed into his face, bringing blood into his mouth, and another fist landed sickingly against his temple. Gravel crunched beneath his feet. There was a muttered curse. He spit some of the blood at a face that bobbed suddenly before him—he didn't know which—and slammed his own right into the pit of a muscular stomach. He struck out again, blindly, his vision blurred by a sudden burst of pain. He felt a second burst of pain, exactly as before, and went to his hands and knees. He couldn't see the ground. He was aware of nothing but the pain.

A heavy boot landed against Womack's ribs. His arms and legs crumpled beneath him. The boot landed again and he rolled over on his back. Pain waved through his eyes. He saw the dark outlines of the two men standing over him.

One of the men was holding something white against his face.

"Come on," the other one said. "Let's get the bastard into the car."

They each took an arm, hauled Womack to his feet, and put him into the back of the car. He was on the floor and he pulled himself to his hands and knees again. He felt very sick. He was aware of the car being put into motion. Then something solid struck the back of his head and he was no longer aware of anything.

Womack heard the voice before opening his eyes.

It said, "What in Christ's name is the matter with you guys? Can't you make a simple pinch without getting your dumb faces kicked in?"

Womack opened his eyes—gingerly. The voice belonged to a very fat guy seated behind a battered wooden desk. He had a round, florrid face, and his hair had receded to a few strands over each ear. A badge with the word *Sheriff* was pinned to the front of his sweat-sopped khakis.

Womack moved his head. The two deputies stood against the far wall. They were looking at the sheriff. The small one held a blood-stained handkerchief to his nose. Blood was splattered down the front of his shirt.

The burly one said, "Christ, Wibber—"

"Don't Christ me."

"How did we know the bastard was going to start swinging at us?"

"That's just it. You didn't."

"We did the best we could."

"Then I'd hate to see your worst." Wibber shifted his gaze from Womack to the two men. "Now get into some uniforms that don't look like you been killing chickens in them."

Wibber waited until the door had closed. Then he looked at Womack and said, "You a tough guy, Womack?"

Womack, tongue-tied by the pain in his head, only sat there.

Wibber went on. "Maybe you

think this is some kind of hick town, that we don't know how to handle tough guys, is that it?"

The base of Womack's skull was a dull consistency of pain. He sat upright in his chair and said, "It might interest you to know, Sheriff, that your trained apes out there came at me first."

The sheriff's western hat sat before him on the desk. He shoved it to one side, leaned forward, and put his weight on his elbows. "Now, why would they do that?"

"I'm hoping the judge will ask that question."

Wibber smiled mockingly.

"It ain't funny. Your guys jumped me out there and I'm going to find out why."

"That's your story."

"You're goddamned right that's my story." Womack could feel the anger flooding in over the pain. "It's the story I'll tell in court . . . when I sue you for putting these bumps on my head."

Wibber held onto an impulse to raise his voice. He said, "You're not going to sue anybody, Womack. Not in this county. Because you're getting out of it."

"Now listen—"

"You listen, Mister." Wibber looked at him disgustedly. "We got laws to protect the citizens of this town. They're strict laws and we make 'em stick. We don't hold with drunks behind the wheel of a car . . . and we don't like transients molesting our women."

*So that was it.* Womack reached for his cigarettes. He should have known. He *had* known. But he had been too stupid to heed his own warning. A dame like that—with a too-high price tag—had to belong to somebody big. Maybe, Womack thought, she belongs to this fat bastard with the badge.

"So I'm a sex maniac, eh?" Womack said thickly.

Wibber was silent for a moment, gazing at Womack through small, hard eyes. Then he said, "I don't know, Womack. Is that what you are?"

Womack blurted out, "Come off it, Sheriff! Quit talking nonsense. Hell, if anything, the broad picked me up. We had a few beers. What's the law against that?"

Wibber belched, his face tight with pain, and rubbed his stomach. "It's like I said, Womack, that's your story."

There was no use talking. Womack could see that now. The cards were stacked. They had always been stacked against him. He said resignedly, "So I made a mistake."

"Eh?"

"I said I made a mistake."

"You bet your sweet life you made a mistake."

"Okay. Okay." Womack studied the backs of his hands. They were covered with thin scratches. He said, "It ain't exactly going to break my heart to leave this town. I wouldn't be here now if my rig hadn't broken down. As soon as

it's fixed, in a couple of days, I'll be moving along."

Wibber's stomach seemed to be bothering him. He belched again to make himself feel better. He said, "If you're smart, Mister, you'll be moving on right now. Tonight."

"I can't do that, Sheriff. And you can't make me. If you want to lock me up . . . that's something else. But you had better make darn sure you can make it stick."

"Say, listen, don't you worry about that. I can make it stick. You damn right. We know how to take care of punks in this county."

"Is this your county, Sheriff?"

"Just what does that mean?" Wibber's voice was a rough whisper.

Womack paused to light his cigarette. "I was just wondering who owns you, Sheriff."

Wibber's face turned purple. He was obviously thrown off stride. He blurted, "One more crack like that and I'll lock you up right now. I mean it."

"So go ahead, Sheriff. You're dying to do that anyway. Lock me up . . . and see what it gets you."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"I've got a question."

"What is it?"

"When can I go?"

Womack's wallet was on the desk. Wibber picked it up and thumbed through it. "Johnny Womack, eh?"

"That's right."

"When can your rig roll?"

"Day after tomorrow."

Wibber tossed the wallet to Womack. "You make sure you're out of town by then."

## 8.

It was like waking up after being drunk the night before—only *really* drunk—when you don't remember what happened and you're conscious only of the killing pain in your head.

Womack listened to the knocking on the window of the tractor and debated about opening his eyes. He didn't want to open them. But the fist pounding against glass only aggravated the ache in his head so he climbed down from the sleeper finally and opened the door.

The sun wasn't up yet. Womack was glad for that. This way he could gradually accustom his eyes to the light.

Bernie White, dressed in clean coveralls and a black skull cap with the words *ABC Garage*, stood with his hand on the door. He said, "Didn't know you were going to sleep in the rig. There's an extra cot in the back of the garage. You could have used that."

"Thanks." Womack looked at the dark sky. The stars were still out. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty." White already had a wad stuck under his lip. "Thought I'd get an early start. Maybe have 'er running for you by tomorrow morning."

"That would be just fine."

White grinned at him. "Rough night, eh?"

"Yeah. Pretty rough." Womack touched his face.

"The washroom is unlocked if you want to clean up."

"Thanks."

There was no warm water in the washroom but Womack shaved anyway, using the coarse latherless soap, careful to avoid the bruises on his face. When he had finished he toweled off and examined his face in the mirror. There was a nasty bruise under one eye and his fingers discovered a deep cut at the base of his skull but, aside from those two things, no serious damage. Only the pain.

He ordered a plate of eggs in a little diner directly across the highway from the garage. From his stool at the counter he could see Bernie White's legs sticking out from under the tractor.

He used to like to watch the sun come up on the desert. It always gave him a thrill. There was something clean and fresh and invigorating about the air in the morning, before the sun made it stale. But this morning he felt nothing, absolutely nothing.

The eggs were tasteless and the coffee like scalding water. He looked at the date on a soiled calendar over the grill and with a bitter grimace remembering that it was his birthday. *Happy birthday, sucker.* Johnny Womack, the guy everybody said was going to set the world on fire, broke, wife gone, stuck in a two-bit burg with a broken-down rig and no dough to cover the tab.

Womack gave a short, hard laugh.

He put down his cup and looked across the highway. White had crawled out from under the tractor. The mechanic was talking to someone over by the pumps. Womack knew right away who it was. He cursed softly under his breath.

White was talking to the sheriff. Wibber looked very big and imposing and official in the western hat. It was only a few minutes past six and already the sheriff was mopping at his neck with a diaper-sized handkerchief. It was going to be hot. The sheriff stopped talking once and gazed over at the diner. Womack couldn't see his face beneath the wide hatbrim but he got the impression that Wibber was looking directly through the window at him.

Womack wondered if trouble was boiling up again.

He found that he didn't much care. He had the feeling that there would be nothing but trouble for him now wherever he went. Thanks to Emma, he hadn't a dime to show for the ten years he'd saved so that he could have his own rig, because she'd skipped out with everything—every last cent. It was an even chance now that he would have to get rid of the rig or be chewed up with finance charges.

Womack had a sudden vision of the gun concealed beneath the dash in the big tractor. For a moment, the vision gave him confidence, and he knew that everything was going to be all right. But the confidence was replaced by a sudden sense of fear. He took a sip of coffee, its bitterness like black bile in his throat, and reached for the sugar.

He was thinking like a fool. He was being ridiculous. He wasn't about to risk another stretch in reform school—in prison, this time—for some penny-ante heist.

He had a second cup of coffee and watched the sun come up and felt the sweat forming damp spots under his shirt.

## 9.

When Sammy Travis unlocked the door at four-thirty that same afternoon, Lila was in the bathroom, adding tapwater to a couple of highballs.

"I heard you coming up the stairs," she said. "I figured you might want one of these."

He didn't wait but went in the bathroom.

Lila had her hair tied back in a loose pony tail and she was wearing a robe. She handed him a glass and he took a long swallow before saying acidly, "You been wearing that robe all day?"

"It's hot. I was getting ready to take a shower."

He put a hand on her arm and pulled her around to face him. She didn't move. He said, "I told you not to go out last night."

She looked nervous and on edge. He could tell that she had already been drinking. She said, "We going to fight?"

"It's up to you."

"I don't want to fight, Sam." Her eyes softened.

He released her arm.

She walked past him into the bedroom. "What's the sense of staying home all the time? You're never here."

"I'm in the Army, remember?" He followed her. "I ain't no general, either. I come to town whenever I can."

"Whenever you're not chasing around after some girl."

"That sounds great, coming from you."

"What's happened to us, Sam?"

"You can answer that as well as I can."

"Thanks."

"What's the matter with you, anyway? You weren't this way in New York."

"This isn't New York, Sam." The room had twin beds. She sat down on one of them. "What am I supposed to do, just sit around this crummy room while you play soldier?"

"I told you. It won't be for long."

"It had better not be."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're the smart guy. You figure it out."

Travis removed his tie and sat down on the bed, not looking at her, and said, "Who was the guy?"

"How do I know? He seemed like an okay guy. He wanted to have a few drinks and dance. What's wrong with that?"

"You tell me."

"Don't make it sound dirty." She looked at him. "I don't sleep with every guy who comes along."

"Only the ones who ask."

"You've got a rotten mouth."

"It's a rotten world."

"Only because you think it's rotten, Sam." A look of sorrow came over her face. "Why can't you be like other people? Why do you have to own everyone so completely? Like Sheriff Wibber. He had that man almost killed last night . . . because he's afraid of you . . . of what will happen to him if he doesn't do exactly as you say."

"Wibber's a hick."

"You say that because you own him. But you can't own everyone, Sam. Not everyone. I hoped that being drafted into the Army would teach you that."

"The Army's no different than anything else, baby. Only bigger." He sipped his drink and stretched out on the bed. "And before I get through . . . it's going to be three quarters of a million bucks poorer."

The thought seemed to please her. She spread her robe on the bed so that the air would get to her bare legs. She sipped her drink.

"Sam?"

"Eh?"

"I didn't fix anything to eat."

"I don't want anything."

"I thought maybe you could take me out."

"Sure, baby. Sure."

"Sam, honey—"

"Eh?"

"Sweetie."

"What?"

"I love you."

Travis lit a cigarette, following her every movement, as she got out of the robe. She wore nothing but a bra and panties underneath. They were very brief and very white against the mahogany brown of her skin. Travis said, "You've got one hell of a body, baby."

"It's not bad," she admitted. She unfastened the bra, teasing him, walking toward the bathroom like a stripper on a stage.

Lila finished undressing in the bathroom with the door closed and while he listened to the shower running Travis sipped his drink and smoked. It was only a matter of days now. Nine, to be exact, and there was still one gaping hole in his plan. But he was confident that he would find a way to plug it. He had to. This was the big one . . . the million dollar heist that would make him a legend.

Travis laughed out loud. In exactly ten days he and Lila would be in Mexico with all the time and all the money in the world, and nothing to do but live it up.

"That's the coolest I've been all day," Lila said as she came out of the bathroom. She was naked. Water still glistened on her body. Her breasts looked very big and cold and dominating. There was a strong scent of gardenias in the room.

Travis put down his glass and stared at her, fascinated. She opened her mouth. He got to his feet and pulled her to him.

"Sam, don't, you'll get all wet."

"Who cares?"

"Sam—" She melted against him, whispering fiercely, her eyes tightly closed.

There was a knock on the door.

"Christ—" Travis released Lila, removed an Army .45 automatic from the drawer of the bedside table, and went to the door. Without opening it, he said, "Who is it?"

"It's me. Open up."

"Who?"

"Wibber." The voice was clattery. "For Christ's sake, open the door."

Travis stuffed the .45 into his hip pocket, released the night latch, and stepped back as Wibber came into the room. He said, "What's the idea coming here?"

For a moment Wibber stood there rooted, his puffy eyes slitted, riveted on Lila.

She hadn't expected Travis to open the door. It had happened so quickly that she was still frozen by the bed, completely naked, water dripping from her body onto the napless carpet.

"My God, Sam. My God," she moaned slowly. Her eyes pleaded. "Don't you even care?"

Travis said acidly, "Shut up and get your robe on. Nobody asked you to stand there."

Savagely, Lila pulled the cheap chenille spread from the bed, used it to cover her nakedness. Walking into the bathroom, she slammed the door.

Wibber eyed the water on Travis' khakis. He licked his lips. He said, "I sure picked a bad time."

"I told you never to come here without calling first."

"I figured you'd want to hear what I got to say."

"Whadda you mean?"

"It's about the guy we picked up last night. The one that was . . . bothering . . . your wife."

"I didn't tell you to beat the guy."

"You said you wanted him out of town."

"Yeah. But I didn't tell you to beat him. We don't want any trouble right now."

"Don't worry."

"What about him."

Wibber reached for his handkerchief and grinned. "Only that the bastard is the answer to our problem."

Later, after they had discussed Wibber's idea, Travis forced his mouth into something probably meant to be a smile and said, "It might just work."

"Hell. I know it'll work."

Wibber was pleased. It made him proud that Travis liked his plan. Not that it actually was his plan—White had given him the main idea and he had simply added the details—but at least now maybe Travis wouldn't think he was the only guy in the world with any brains.

Travis said, "One thing bothers me."

"What's that?"

"How do we know he'll go along?"

"He'll go along." Wibber grinned out of the corner of his mouth. "I've done some checking. The guy's got a record. And he's obviously down on his luck."

"That ain't no guarantee he'll come in on a heist like this."

"We got the best guarantee in the world."

"What's that?" Travis looked at him.

"A chance at three quarters of a million bucks."

## 10.

On Thursday morning, the day the rig was supposed to be ready to roll again, Womack went to a loan company on Mainstreet.

A perspiring, slightly bald man with distrustful eyes stood behind a waist-high counter that ran the full length of the room. Beyond the counter was a row of four wooden desks, three of which were also occupied by perspiring, slightly bald men. At the fourth desk a girl in a white blouse and pleated white skirt sat working an office calculator. In one corner was an open, chest-high partitioned office with a cardboard *Manager* sign affixed with tape to the opaque, pebbled glass.

Womack stopped in front of the man behind the counter and said, "I'd like to borrow some money."

"Do you have an account, Mr. . . .?"

"Womack."

"Have you borrowed from us before?"

"No."

"What amount would you like to borrow?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"I'm sorry." The man smiled thinly. "We limit first borrowers to one hundred dollars. If you would like to fill out this application . . ."

Womack looked at the form. "How soon can I have the money?"

"Are you a resident of Valerie, Mr. Womack?"

"No."

"Of Arizona?"

"California."

"Oh." The man looked at him distrustfully. "It normally takes three to four days to process out-of-state applications."

Womack looked at the form again. It reminded him of the complicated, meaningless forms he was required to fill out upon entering the reform school.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll be leaving town today or tomorrow."

"I'm sorry." The man's eyes narrowed further. "If you would care to speak to our manager, Mr. Marmor . . ."

"No thanks."

Womack gave the man a hard look and headed for the door. He walked down Mainstreet to the *ABC Garage*. White was standing by the big tractor, wiping his hands on a grease rag, a wad of tobacco stretching one cheek out of shape. He smiled and kicked one of the big tires with the toe of his shoe. "All ready to roll. Plenty of guts, too. I had 'er out on the road this morning."

"How's the compression?"

"Went up two or three points at least."

"That's good."

They went into the cluttered office. White presented Womack with the bill. The estimate had been fairly close. The job came to a little over one hundred and eighty.

Womack said, "Can I mail you a check? I'm a little short on cash."

"I ain't supposed to do that, Mr. Womack." White took a Coke from the dispenser and popped the cap off. "The boss is out sick, or you could talk to him, but I reckon he wouldn't mind if I took your check . . . now."

"I doubt if it would be much good."

"Sounds like the trucking business ain't much good right now." White put his feet on the desk and eyed Womack critically.

"Business is bad all over."

"Buddy, you're right. You're so goddamned right it hurts." White swallowed half of the Coke. "It's them union bosses. A bunch of racketeers. Crooks, just lousy crooks. Stuffing their own pockets while the rest of us work our tails off."

"You're telling me."

"Did you ever think what it would be like to have all the cash you wanted? Think of the liquor you could drink . . . and the thick steaks . . . and the women. For Chrissakes think of the women."

Womack looked at him, his face blank.

White continued, his voice hoarse, a funny gleam in his eyes. "Suppose, just for the hell of it, you knew of a way to get your hands on some real dough. Cash. Lots of it. Say three quarters of a million dollars. Maybe a million. Think what you could do with that kind of dough . . ."

They talked for the better part of an hour.

In the end it was easier than even Wibber had imagined.

## 11.

There were four of them now.

They met late at night in the rear of the *ABC Garage*, behind carefully locked doors, with only the light from one naked bulb to illuminate the map spread on a greasy workbench. Big, perspiring

Wibber. Bernie White, his face drawn, his hands swollen from hours of frantic last-minute preparation on the rig. Sammy Travis, nervous and irritable, smoking incessantly—but whose nerves suddenly jelled when he held a gun in the face of danger. Womack, hands thrust into the pocket of his jacket, thinking oddly of his father's suicide and of Emma, his wife, and of the twelve bitter years in a reform school. And there was Lila—actually, Lila made it five—standing apart from the others but very much a part of the group.

"This whole deal," Sammy was saying, "depends on everybody—I mean *everybody*—doing exactly what they're supposed to do at exactly the right time."

He looked at Womack.

"If anybody screws up—if anybody loses his head and panics—he's going to have to answer to me. I mean it. So you all had better understand that from the start."

Travis' eyes left Womack and made a quick tour of the others. There didn't seem to be any argument. He looked at White and said, "Bernie, you're the key to the whole exercise. You carry off your end and we should be able to walk through without a scratch."

"Don't worry about my end." White's voice carried complete conviction. "It's all taken care of. They brought the truck in yesterday . . . just like always . . . to have it serviced. I've been working on it for three months now. It'll be like cracking an egg."

"I guess I came in late," Womack said. "You want to tell me how you plan to crack it?"

There was silence and then Travis said, "You tell him, Bernie."

"Sure." White's voice was intense, a curious blend of pride and suspicion, as he said, "You know the problem. Two armed security guards accompany the Army payroll in the truck. Besides the driver, there's a guy sealed in the back, armed with a sawed-off shotgun and a .38 Special."

"It's the guy in the back that's the kicker," Wibber interrupted.

"That's right," White went on. "No matter what happens to the driver . . . we've got to take care of the guy in back before we can get our hands on the dough."

Womack said, "That's one of the things that have been bothering me. How do you figure on getting him out?"

Wibber's thick lips opened in a grin. "That's the beauty of the whole operation. We don't!"

"Huh?"

"That's my idea," Travis said. "Instead of wasting a lot of valuable time trying to bust open that truck . . . we seal the guard *inside* . . . where he can't do us any harm. Not bad, eh?"

"Not bad," Womack said. "Only what's he going to be doing with that shotgun while we're loading the truck into the van?"

"Bernie."

"That's my department again." White opened a drawer in the workbench, removed a heavy object wrapped in an oil-soaked rag, and held it under the light. "I machined it right here in the shop after hours. This one and four others like it. They screw into the gun ports in the back of the truck. There's enough steel in each of them to stop a bazooka shell. And once they're in they can't be loosened from the inside."

Womack whistled softly.

He said, "You mean the gun ports are threaded?"

"They are now." White looked at him and grinned.

"That ain't all," Travis said. "There's an ignition cut-off switch and an emergency brake in the back of the truck. That's so the guy riding shotgun can stop the truck and kill the engine if anything happens to the driver."

"They don't mess around."

"Neither do we." Travis lit a cigarette. "Bernie here has taken care of that too."

"What if they check out the truck each morning. The way they check an airplane before taking off."

"They won't find a thing," White said. "I've rigged both the ignition cut-off and the brake so they'll work just fine . . . until I loosen a bolt and a couple of wires beneath the truck."

Womack said, "Sounds like you've got it pretty well covered."

"We told you we did."

"One more thing."

"What's that?"

"How about the driver?"

"I've been waiting for you to ask. It's the sweetest part of the plan." White's humor soared. He looked at Travis. "Tell him, Sam."

Travis half smiled. He said, "It's like Bernie says. The driver is the easy part, a pushover, perched in there behind the armor plate and bullet-proof glass like a sitting duck. He won't even know what hit him."

There was a silence and then Wibber giggled faintly. He said, "I get a bang out of just thinking about it."

"What's amusing the sheriff," Travis said, "is the fact that the cab of that truck is like a fortress. Armor plating like a tank and safety glass that'll take six .38 slugs point blank at the same spot and not even wrinkle."

"I'm afraid I don't get the joke."

"Don't you?" Wibber laughed out loud. "Man, there ain't no safety glass in that truck."

Womack looked at White.

White grinned and said, "Wibber's partially right. Safety glass don't look no different than regular plate. I replaced the pane of glass on the driver's side with regular plate the last time I serviced 'er. Took me about eleven minutes. Then I cleaned all the windows as usual . . . so the phony wouldn't look no different from the rest."

"You know the rest of it," Wibber said. "All you got to do is get in that rig of yours and drive on to glory."

Womack looked at Wibber. "I ain't exactly sure what your part is, Sheriff. You going to be around during the actual heist, or is your job just making suggestions?"

"You ain't one to talk, Womack," Travis said quickly. "If it wasn't for Wibber here, you wouldn't be in on the operation. It was his idea."

"I was just wondering."

"Well don't." The two men locked eyes. "Any questions of that kind will come from me. Wibber has an important part in the operation. If he didn't, he wouldn't be here, so forget the smart remarks. You just make sure you're ready to roll when the time comes."

Womack braced himself against the workbench, his arms spread beside him, fingers pressing hard into the greasy wood. The fingers quivered in spite of his pressure to keep them still.

*After tomorrow,* he thought, *there'll be no more kidding yourself. After tomorrow you'll be a thief—maybe even a murderer—and it won't be like in the war. Kill a guy in the war and they pin a medal. But tomorrow will be different.*

Womack looked at the others, at Lila who stood slightly apart, smoking silently. His mind went to Emma, back over a life that had led him to this, and he raised his hands.

Womack's eyes swept over the others, a half smile on his face, as he said, "I'm ready to roll right now."

## 12.

Julio Silvera looked at his five-year-old daughter. She sat with him at breakfast, studying him with warm brown eyes, round face resting in the palm of her hand.

They had a way—especially at breakfast—of communicating by means of a mystical, silent language known only to father and daughter. This morning something in Julio's eyes was saying, "Don't put so much jam on your toast."

And in his daughter's eyes: "I love you, Daddy."

For some reason—perhaps it was faint uneasiness that drained the appetite from his stomach—the silent line of communications seemed to be breaking down so that Julio, wrinkling his paper impatiently, said aloud, "Finish your milk, Debbie."

Carole, his wife, came in from the kitchen. She looked immaculate even in the worn-out robe, hair pulled straight back and secured with a rubber band, then falling to her shoulders in a long pony-tail. She was very fair. He liked the lightness of her hair and complexion. It always gave him a strange sense of satisfaction when others, startled by the contrast of his own dark skin, turned to stare.

Carole poured the coffee and sat down opposite her husband. Moving the jam jar out of the reach of her daughter, she said pleasantly, "Drink your milk, Debbie."

"Carole—"

She looked at him and he could tell—had known all morning—that she sensed something on his mind. He had been a fool to wait this long to tell her. Now he didn't quite know how.

She waited and when he didn't speak she said, "Have you talked to Mr. Phillips? I mean . . . about your vacation."

*I might as well get it over,* he thought.

"There won't be any vacation. Today is my last day."

"Julio!"

He shrugged. "I told you when I took the job it might only be temporary. Mr. Phillips wants to retire. He's tired. And starting next month the Army is going to handle the payroll transfer. I think that's what finally made him decide. The Army's his biggest account. Without the Army, he'd just be losing money anyway."

"And us?" She looked up, her eyes wet. "What about us?"

"We'll make out okay." He tugged at his daughter's pony-tail and, bending over, kissed her lightly on the nose. He repeated the process—it was part of the morning ritual—with his wife. "I stopped off to see Mr. Burton last night. He's short-handed at the lumber yard again. He wants me to work through the summer and maybe stay on permanently if business picks up."

"Did he say how much he'll pay?"

"No. We've just been talking, kind of. I'll go by and see him again tonight."

"Well. I'll miss seeing you in your uniform. You're really very handsome, you know." She adjusted the collar of his shirt—*Phillips Armored Transport Service* said the triangular patch on the short sleeve—and stood back to survey the effect. "But I don't mind telling you that I'm a little relieved now that it's all over. I never liked the idea of your being responsible for all of that money. It's just too risky."

"No more risky than a lot of jobs." He grinned. "If it was, the pay would be better."

Carole walked as far as the back screen porch with her husband, kissed him lightly, and watched as he backed their second-hand Volkswagen out of the garage.

Although it was the beginning of another hot day in July, inexplicably, she shivered.

## 13.

Lila and Sammy Travis checked out of the hotel before breakfast on that same Tuesday morning. They left in the white Thunderbird and Lila was driving. She was dressed

in shorts and a sleeveless blouse. Sammy wore a sportshirt, open at the neck, and a pair of lightweight golf slacks. His jacket was tossed over the seat between them. The inside pocket contained his three-day-old discharge papers. He reached over and patted the pocket. Then, placing his head back on the seat, he smiled as the warmth of the early morning sun touched him. Lila found a parking place on Mainstreet and the two of them went into a cafe and ordered a leisurely breakfast. Their watches had been carefully checked. They had time to kill.

Bernie White ate breakfast in the little diner across the highway from the *ABC Garage*. He was neatly dressed and he had a battered suitcase. Yesterday had been his last day at the garage but Mr. Hitt, who was back on the job now, had allowed him to sleep overnight on the old Army cot. He had four eggs, over easy, a side order of country sausage, fried potatoes, toast and coffee. He reflected that it had been this way when he was in the war. He had always been hungry just before going into action. A picture came into his mind. It was of a man in his company who had been killed during the Battle of the Bulge. The bullet had smashed the man's face so that he could not breathe. He had choked to death. The thought did not affect White's appetite. He put the image from his mind and continued eating.

Womack went without breakfast that morning. Waking up a little before eight a.m. he walked along Mainstreet until he found a barber shop that was open. He had a shave, trying to relax, but his mind spun crazily. He closed his eyes beneath a steaming towel and listened while the barber filled him in on the news. It was bad, as always. Somehow, the thought that the world was in a mess seemed to cheer him. When he came outside the sun was up full and for some reason he felt better. He walked south for a block and a half, past the cafe where Lila and Sammy sat over a leisurely breakfast, then west for two blocks to where the big rig was parked. As he climbed behind the wheel he looked at his wristwatch. Exactly nine-fifty. Right on schedule. He kicked the engine over and crawled out into traffic. Five minutes later he hit the highway. The sun broiled white and hot on the concrete. He could feel the sweat forming damp spots under his arms and beneath the belt around his waist. For a moment he had the feeling that the whole thing was ridiculous, that no one in his right mind could possibly take a thing like this seriously, that he should laugh at the whole deal and keep right on rolling until he hit El Centro. But for Johnny Womack the feeling passed.

Sheriff Adam Wibber woke up that morning in a tangle of sodden sheets, sweltering and suffering,

gas pains like gnawing worms in his stomach. He heard someone groaning and realized that it was himself. Still groaning, he got to his feet, and walked into the kitchen. He stood in the middle of the floor, his two-hundred-and-forty pound body stripped to the waist, his bare feet splayed out over the faded linoleum. For one brief, unpleasant instant, he thought of his wife, Sarah. They had been divorced for over twelve years and in all of that time he thought of her only when confronted with the prospect of getting his own breakfast. He took a pan from the stack of pans in the sink and started water boiling for his cereal.

An hour later Wibber left the house and got into the tan-and-white car with the star on the side. He drove very carefully leaving Valerie and headed west on Route 77 until it intersected a secondary county road. He checked his watch. It was ten thirty-two. At ten forty he got out of the car. Lighting a phosphorous flare, he dropped it onto the highway, in the westbound lane. Then he dug out his handkerchief and mopped the sweatband of his western hat.

He belched, thinking that after today he would never again have to fix his own breakfast.

## 14.

In the sweltering, glass- and steel-enclosed cab of the armored car, Old Man Phillips—his first name was Cornell—removed his battered uniform cap and placed it on the seat. He wiped his lined face, thinking that this was the last time he would have to bake through the day in an oven on wheels. He would receive no gold watch when he retired, had no family to spend his extra leisure time with—but he had had enough of working.

Turning his head slightly, Phillips glanced through the small window separating the body of the truck from the cab. Julio Silvera sat on the small seat that hinged down from the wall. A sawed-off shotgun rested across his knees. Phillips sighed. He felt a faint pang of guilt, closing up shop this way, leaving the kid high and dry. Not that there was anything he could do. It was fate that the Army had decided to transfer the payrolls themselves from now on. And there was nothing anybody could do about fate . . .

When Phillips returned his eyes to the road he saw the flare and flashing red light.

"What's up, Mr. Phillips?" Julio's voice, filtered through the bullet-proof steel mesh of the voice vent, had a recorded sound.

"Don't know." Phillips brought the heavy truck to a stop, engine idling, and glanced alertly over the surrounding terrain. "Looks like the Sheriff. Got a flare in the road. Must be a wreck up the highway somewhere."

"See anything?"

"Not a thing."

Wibber crossed in front of the truck, dabbing at his neck with his handkerchief, and slowly approached the gun vent in the door of the cab. Phillips watched him. He had never cared much for the sheriff. He looked at Wibber's uniform, soaked through with perspiration, and imaged that he could almost smell his body odor through the gun port. His voice sounded surprisingly loud through the vent as he said, "What's the trouble, Sheriff? Wreck?"

"Uh-huh. Bad smash-up about two miles up the road. Some bastard rammed a produce truck pulling out of the Wilbert place. Cabbages all over the place." He laughed. His eyes were little round holes of heat in the perspiring face. "Guy following the first car barreled right into the wreckage. Got the road pretty well blocked."

"Anybody killed?"

"All but one. They're trying to cut him loose with acetylene. Take another hour probably. Passenger cars can get around by driving on the shoulder, but the sand is soft, so we're routing the trucks and heavy vehicles over the old Murray Road."

"That's kind of a long way around, ain't it?"

Wibber shrugged. "Better'n waiting here all day. Not that I give a damn. You can do what you want."

Without further words, Phillips released the clutch, backed the truck a few yards and turned onto the connecting road.

Wibber watched until the truck disappeared around a turn in the road. Then, working quickly, he scuffed out the flare and tossed the dead end into the brush. He had been lucky. Only a few cars had come along and he had waved them through without explanation. And there had been no other trucks.

He whistled happily as he drove back toward town.

## 15.

At exactly ten-fifteen Bernie White settled his bill at the diner and, pausing long enough to purchase cigarettes from a vending machine, went outside and stood by his suitcase near the edge of the highway. It was a beautiful day.

Three minutes later Lila and Sammy Travis picked up White in the Thunderbird convertible. The radio was playing. White tossed his suitcase in the rear seat, jumped in beside it. Then the three of them drove to where Womack had parked the tractor-van on the old Murray Road.

Lila stopped just long enough for Travis and White to get out. A few minutes later she was back on the highway heading for El Centro.

Womack was having trouble with the truck. At least, to anyone who happened along on the road,

it would appear that way. The heavy, left-hand hood was raised and Womack, a greasy towel spread over the fender, was working on the engine with a big wrench.

Without speaking to Womack, Travis and White went around to the rear of the van and, opening the big double doors, jumped up into the interior. Then they closed the doors behind them.

They found two flashlights in a rack just inside the van. Moving quickly, but with practiced precision, the two men made a last minute inventory.

At the far end of the van, near the cab, an army cot had been set up and bracketed to the floor. Two blankets lay folded on it. Underneath was a box of medical supplies. White flashed his light quickly inside. On top was a package containing a half dozen morphine surettes. At one end of the cot were two large jars of drinking water and several cardboard cartons of food.

"No beer?" White's gutteral laugh sounded very loud in the closed van.

"In a couple of hours you'll be able to buy all of the beer in the world. A swimming pool full of beer, with dames in it, swimming back and forth naked."

"Man! I'd dive right in. I'd—"

Travis dug out a key, unfastened the lid of a government issue footlocker, opened it. They shined both of the lights inside. It was the stuff Travis had swiped from the Army: two carefully-oiled submachine guns, two .45 automatics, an assortment of ammunition clips.

Travis removed one of the submachine guns and cradled it in his arms. Closing the footlocker, he crossed over to where an acetylene tank and two cutting torches were secured by rope and metal hooks to the side of the van. Smiling thinly, he patted the side of the tank, then he motioned for White and the two men jumped back down to the road.

Womack was still pretending to work on the engine. He was surprisingly calm. In fact, he wasn't at all nervous, and that fact alone seemed to disturb him. He should have felt *something*. The knowledge that there was danger in what he was about to do, that he might actually die during the next few minutes, should have terrified him. But he felt good. Felt fine.

Travis came over and grinned at him. "Jittery?"

Womack shook his head.

"Good." Travis looked at White. "How about you?"

"Not me." White smiled at him wryly. "It'll be just like at the Bulge. Only them Kraut tanks had thicker skins."

"Remember, anybody panics . . ." Travis caressed the stock of the submachine gun to make clear his meaning. Then, motioning for White, he walked through a shallow gully and squated down be-

hind two rusted oil drums that had been placed in a dense thicket.

White, carrying a long metal device and dragging a heavy burlap sack, knelt beside Travis. It was a good hiding place. They had selected it only after several trips along the road.

Travis looked at his watch.

White wiped his glistening face with a corner of the burlap sack. It left a red welt on his cheek. He said, "You reckon Wibber will handle his end okay?"

For a long time, Travis didn't answer.

He looked at his watch again. He dug out a handkerchief and mopped at his face.

Then, when he saw the armor-plated truck appear several hundred yards down the road, he smiled thinly and said, "Don't worry about Wibber. Just make sure you get under that truck when I open up with the chopper."

## 16.

It was exactly ten fifty-one when Old Man Phillips brought the armored car to a stop several yards behind the apparently stalled rig.

He swore under his breath. If he had lived a few minutes longer he might have reflected on the coincidence of another delay so soon after the first. But his first thought was of the heat. It became almost unbearably hot whenever he stopped completely.

The van blocked almost two-thirds of the road. There was a possibility that he could drive around. He put the truck into gear. He was about to inch forward when he saw a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked. A man was standing beside the road. Phillips swore when he saw what the man was holding. He thought, *the fool. He must be crazy . . .*

Travis squeezed the trigger on the submachine gun. The Army had spent hours teaching him that. But his aim was bad. The first bullets hammered against metal. He raised the barrel slightly. The sound the bullets made was deafeningly loud. They smashed the phony safety glass. They tore apart Phillips' head, killing him instantly, before his brain could register the excrutiating pain.

While Travis still squeezed the trigger, White was on his feet, running headlong toward the rear of the armored car. His eyes were wide with terror. The sack was painfully heavy and it slammed against his knees. He stumbled ahead. The air was saturated with the smell of burned powder.

Stumbling, panting, White closed the distance between himself and the truck. He felt his heart beating faster. At one of the windows in the side of the truck a dark face appeared for a split second. He felt the impact of a bullet tearing through the fleshy part of his forearm. He made an incredible leap

forward, sack held before him like a shield, kicking wildly with both legs until he was safely under the truck.

White lay there, pain stabbing savagely through his arm, listening. There was a sudden stillness. He raised his head and gazed along the ground. He saw Womack, framed between two long rows of tires, lying in a similar position under the big tractor.

"White!" Womack's voice sounded choked with dust. "You hit?"

White did not answer right away. A strange lethargy prevented him from moving. He thought he heard scratching noises from inside the truck. He raised his head to listen. Blood was trickling down his arm. He felt weak and sick.

"White!" Travis was pinned behind the thin protection of the oil drums.

"Okay! Okay!" White answered impatiently. Slowly, he twisted his body, so that he was lying with his head toward the rear of the armored car. He took care of the emergency brake and the ignition cut-off. Then, gritting his teeth, he began to inch forward.

"White!" Travis' voice was clattery. "We ain't got all day!"

"You want to come out here and take care of it yourself?" White turned his head and spit. Just like that bastard! He cursed himself for a fool for having been talked into this part of the operation.

When he was almost directly beneath the rear bumper he took two half-inch steel bolts from his pocket and inserted them into freshly-bored holes in the truck frame. Then, with the door bolted closed, he went about the business of plugging the gun ports.

The metal bar was very ingenius. It was Travis' idea. The two-inch metal plugs fit into a ratchet device at one end, allowing White to screw them into the gun ports while lying on his back on the ground, with only his head and arms sticking out from under the truck. Even partially exposed this way, he was perfectly safe, because the man in the truck could not fire directly down at the ground.

There was one gun port in the back, two on each side, five in all. The pain in White's arm made the going slow. He had to stop several times. Once, while he lay there catching his breath, he heard the thud of bootheels on the metal directly above his head. Suddenly the terrible thought struck him that the man might be able to open a trap door in the floor and shoot him while he lay helplessly on his back. He ignored the pain and began to work faster.

When he finally crawled out from under the truck, Womack and Travis were waiting. The big double doors of the van were open. Travis looked at White's shoulder and said, "Bad?"

"I don't know. It hurts like hell."

Womack ripped the sleeve of

White's shirt and examined the wound. He said, "It's not too serious. The bullet didn't stay in. But you should do something to stop the bleeding."

"Not now. Let's get moving first."

Without further words, Womack and Travis pulled out two heavily-constructed, steel-and-wood tire ramps from the back of the van. They were heavy and it took several minutes to get them into position. They had to be bolted to the frame of the van.

When the ramps were in position, White climbed into the front seat of the armored car. He had to move the body of the dead driver before he could get the truck into gear. He began to inch forward. Womack, standing inside the van, directed him with hand signals. In a matter of seconds, the car was inside.

White could not leave the front seat of the armored car without looking through the connecting window at the guard. It gave him a sudden chill. The guard, a surprisingly young-looking Mexican kid, was seated calmly on a seat that folded down from the wall. He was holding a sawed-off shotgun.

White looked into the man's eyes. The expression he saw there made him clinch his teeth. It was as if the man were already dead.

While White stared, fascinated, the man raised the shotgun and fired it directly at White's head. The sound it made was like a grenade going off. Shot rattled against the shatter-proof glass like birdseed.

Despite the pain in his arm, White threw back his head and laughed.

When he climbed down from the front seat of the armored car, the big van doors were closed, and the rig was moving.

## 17.

From start to finish—from the instant Old Man Phillips brought the armored car to a halt to the instant Womack swung the rig onto Route 77 and began barreling west—the operation took nearly nineteen minutes. That was exactly nine minutes longer than Travis had estimated. And, in their race to get the money out of the area, nine minutes could spell the difference between success and failure.

By eleven-twenty a.m., the telephone lines between the bank, Army post and sheriff's office had begun to overload. It was as if a bomb had landed on Mainstreet. There were frantic charges and countercharges, admonitions and threats, declarations and denials.

Then the general himself got on the phone.

"Is this the sheriff?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"You're in authority? I mean . . . this sort of thing falls under your jurisdiction?"

"Well, sir, it does until somebody tells me it don't."

"What does that mean?"

"The FBI will take over eventually. In the meantime . . . I reckon I'm in charge."

"What's your plan of action?"

"Plan?"

"What are you doing about the armored car?"

"We're looking for it, General."

"Now, see here, Sheriff." There was a tone of annoyance in the general's voice. "A truck that size can't simply disappear. Not in the middle of the desert. The idea is preposterous."

"That's the way we look at it, General." Wibber grinned into the telephone. "We've set up roadblocks on every road leading out of the county. They try to drive the money out . . . we'll nab 'em."

"You are of the opinion that the vehicle is still in the county?"

"That's right. It has to be. Even if they took the money out of the truck, they'd need a car, or another truck to carry it. You can't stuff that kind of cash in a lunch pail or a paper sack."

"Obviously."

"My guess is that they've hidden the armored car out in the desert someplace . . . it's a big desert . . . waiting for things to cool down so they can smuggle the money out a little at a time."

"How about an airplane? Maybe they flew the money out—"

"Not a chance. We've checked with the airport and I've got a man out there now. Nothing's taken off for the past hour and a half."

"The bus station, then. Or the train—" The general was getting frantic.

"We've covered all that. Everything is under control. The only thing to do now is wait." The sheriff belched, not bothering to take his mouth away from the telephone, and rubbed a hand over his stomach. "It's like I said, General. They'll lie low for a while . . . then try to skip the dough out a little at a time. Trickle it out. I know both of those security guards personally, General, and I know just how they'll react. They won't be able to sit tight for long. They'll get restless and make their move in a day or two. And when they do . . . you'll get your pay, General."

"I'm not worried about my pay." The words sounded as if they came through clinched teeth. "The Army has been robbed of a great deal of money. I want it returned. Now . . . what makes you think the security guards were responsible?"

"You mean, how do I know it was an inside job?"

"That's right."

"Well, now, General." Wibber couldn't surpress a chuckle. "It had to be an inside job . . . unless somebody figured out a way to steal a three ton armored car right off a crowded highway. And that ain't possible."

## 18.

Route 77 is a good truck road, straight and flat, with only an occasional hill. Womack kept the rig rolling at sixty-five—five miles faster than called for in the plan—in order to make up time. A lot still depended on timing. Still, he fought down the urge to drive even faster. He couldn't risk being stopped by a cop. Not now. Not with the load he was carrying.

He flicked a half-smoked cigarette through the window, reached in his pocket for some gum, while he fitted together in his mind the remaining segments of the plan. He raised no questions, made no guesses, made no attempt to evaluate their chances. He simply ran his finger down a mental checklist, his mind curiously numb.

Lila would be waiting with the Thunderbird in El Centro. According to the plan, she would meet them at a junction on the other side of town, then follow them along Highway 80 into the mountains. There was a road near Laguna that led to an abandoned logging camp. It was wide enough and straight enough to handle the big logging rigs. That's where they planned to get rid of the armored car and divide the money.

Afterwards, they would go their separate ways—Lila and Sammy Travis to Los Angeles in the Thunderbird, Womack and White back to El Centro in the rig. And Wibber? Womack wondered about Wibber. Supposedly, when things cooled off, he would join Travis in LA to get his share . . .

That was Wibber's problem.

Womack wasn't sure that he heard the siren. Glancing into the rear-view mirror, he spotted the patrol car about a quarter of a mile back, red light flashing. He came as near to panicking then as he ever had. Every nerve told him to push the gas pedal to the floor. His hands tightened on the wheel. He knew that if he ran now it would be the end.

Gritting his teeth, he braked the rig gradually, pulled as far to the right as he could. The car was right behind him. It's siren wailed. He pushed a button under the dash that activated a red warning light in the van.

Womack could see the faces of the troopers as the car rushed past. They were looking straight ahead. One of them had a rifle wedged stock-down between his legs. They were obviously hurrying to set up a roadblock somewhere ahead . . .

Womack reached for the button under the dash, flicked it twice, then resumed his normal speed. He concentrated on his driving. He didn't want things to go wrong because of him. The plan was too good. Too perfect. There wasn't a flaw in it. He looked at his watch again. Things were going off like clockwork.

Sweating, his face lined with con-

centration, Julio Silvera leaned close to the inside of the armored car, his ear a filter, sifting the faraway roar of the engine for a sound that might tell him something.

It was pitch dark in the hot cubicle, like the inside of an empty boiler, but he had managed to study the faces of the two men as they taped newspaper over the windows. He wouldn't have to worry about recognizing them again. Their features were filed away in his brain. The problem now was staying alive . . .

With a frustrated sign, Julio groped his way back to the folding seat, and gave himself over to trying to work out a plan. His uniform was saturated with sweat. He couldn't think clearly. The heat was beginning to fog his brain.

The interior of the van was lighted by two naked bulbs suspended from the ceiling at each end. They gave off only enough light for the two men to work by.

Bernie White crouched near the box of medical supplies. His face was twisted in pain. There was a bandage on his arm. Rolling up his sleeve, he jammed the hollow needle of a morphine surette into his arm at a point just above the bandage, then squeezed the morphine into his blood. In a few minutes the pain was completely gone and he was able to continue with what he had been doing.

He spent the next few minutes attaching a fifteen-foot length of garden hose to the exhaust of the armored car. He was thankful for the morphine in his system. It made this part of the job a little easier. Still, his fingers quivered in spite of his efforts to keep them still. He tried thinking about the money. Three quarters of a million dollars. He grinned. He was actually taking part in one of the biggest heists in criminal history. Hell . . . the Bulge was nothing compared to this.

*And a lot of guys had to get killed at the Bulge,* he rationalized. Besides, this part of the plan was Travis' idea. He had to hand it to Travis. Travis was ruthless—without feeling, even—but he left nothing to chance.

At last White got the hose attached and passed the other end up to Travis who was stretched in a prone position on top of the armored car. There was only a foot and a half of space between the roof of the armored car and the top of the van—but Travis had been able to climb on top with amazing agility.

With aluminum foil and masking tape, Travis had sealed off the three air vents on top of the car. Poking a hole in one of the pieces of foil, he inserted the end of the hose, then he climbed back down.

"Okay, partner," Travis said. "Turn 'er over."

White looked very pale. He said, "You do it. My arm is killing me."

"Sure. Sure." Travis grinned acidly. "Remember. Just like the Bulge."

Travis climbed into the front seat of the armored car, put his foot on the clutch pedal, shifted the transmission into neutral. Then he started the engine . . .

Julio felt rather than heard the engine start. He was trying desperately to think but the heat was making his head grow dizzy. Sweat trickled down his face. He opened his eyes wide but there was absolutely no light in the truck. A sudden fear rose in him. He had the feeling that it would always remain this dark for him. Frantically, he got to his feet and began groping around the truck.

Travis let the engine run for fifteen minutes, checking the hose connections frequently, careful to insure that none of the deadly carbon monoxide leaked into the van. The sound of the engine was low and steady. Once Travis thought he heard a faint moaning and catlike scratchings from the inside of the armored car. He pressed his ear against the warm metal. But there was no other sound.

At the end of the fifteen minutes, Travis climbed back into the cab of the armored car. Peeling the masking tape away from the connecting window, he flashed his light into the back. It illuminated what appeared to be a dozen canvas money sacks. Sprawled awkwardly on his face, as if he had been shot crawling under barbed wire, was the young Mexican kid. He didn't even twitch.

Smiling thinly, Travis cut the engine, got out of the cab.

"Is he dead?" White asked.

"You try it in there for fifteen minutes."

"The crazy bastard."

"Eh?"

"Any guy takes a job hauling that kind of dough . . . he's bound to get it sooner or later."

"Sure."

For the next ten minutes the two men used the acetylene torches on the heavy armor plating of the rear door. When they had sliced through the locking mechanism, Travis stepped to one side, removed the .45 automatic from the belt of his trousers. Pulling the action back, he eased a bullet into firing position.

White looked at him, thinking *the bastard wouldn't take a chance on a three-cent lottery.*

Nevertheless, White opened the door slowly, as if he were entering a nursery and was afraid of disturbing a sleeping child. The current of foul air hit him in the face. For a moment he hesitated. He flashed his light inside, ran the beam over the canvas money sacks, held it on the dark oblong of the guard sprawled like a ragdoll.

Then a strange thing happened.

White blinked his eyes in terror.

*The guard raised his head slowly from the floor.*

There was nothing White could do. He stepped back a pace. The sight of the guard's face, staring at him through grotesque eyes that were like flower blossoms, shocked him. He opened his mouth to express some half-formed thought but before he could speak the guard shot him in the chest. The second shot caught White in the jaw, abruptly closing his still-open mouth, but failing to stifle the scream that reverberated through the van.

Julio's visibility was hampered by the flat eyepieces of the gasmask. It was the thing that cost him his life. He had to turn his head slightly to bring the gun to bear on Travis. Before he could fire again, before he could take aim, Travis shot him. The bullet went through the center of the gasmask, between the anonymous eyepieces, into the brain.

Silvera managed to fire one more shot. But he was already dead, the tightening of his finger a reflex, sending the bullet thudding into a money sack.

Travis pumped another bullet in, just to make sure, then stood looking down at White.

"I kept trying to tell you," he said aloud. "Carelessness can mean the difference between living and dying. You should have listened. You should have paid attention to what I told you . . ." Then a startled expression came to Travis' eyes. He coughed spasmodically.

## 20.

Gradually, as she sat waiting in the Thunderbird at the junction of Route 77 and Highway 80, a lot of things came clear to Lila. Actually, her feelings had been crystalizing over the past few weeks. But it was during those precise moments, while she waited for the big van to appear over a low hill, that she realized with certain finality that everything was wrong. All of it. This impossible robbery, her life with Sammy, all of it wrong.

Before her, so deep that she could not see the bottom of it, was a black abyss. She could no longer ignore it. There was still time for her to turn her back, to walk away, but she knew now that she could no longer pretend that the blackness didn't exist.

She looked for the twentieth time at her watch. It was an expensive watch, a gift from Sammy. She found herself absently counting the jewels in the band and she felt a sudden coldness in her chest and in her mind. It was so hopelessly ridiculous, so terribly idiotic, that for a moment she thought about starting the car and heading back for New York. Or she might go visit her mother in Biloxi.

Somehow the thought left a foul taste in her mouth. She had never cared for her mother and father and they had cared little about her. There would be nothing but unhappiness if she went home.

What then? She no longer fooled herself. It would always be the same with Sammy. The money, if they were successful, would change nothing. They would go right on living the same meaningless life, doing the same meaningless things, regulating their existence by the turn of a card or a senseless whim. And why? For love?

It was odd how her life had been shaped by incidents rather than true feelings. She had slept with Sammy because she liked his looks, had lived with him because she had nowhere else to live, had married him because marriage offered a solution to her problems.

Now, this way, she knew there could be no solution . . .

She was about to start the engine of the car when she suddenly saw the rig—its lights came on, went out, came on again—rumble past with a faint tap on the horn. Without realizing it, Lila sighed deeply, her mind curiously numb. Almost without thinking she moved the Thunderbird into the line of traffic.

The rig was almost a half mile ahead.

As she pressed down on the gas pedal, she had the momentary sensation that she was driving headlong over the side of a bottomless abyss.

## 21.

It was nearly dark when Womack stopped the rig next to a ramshackle lumber shed in the logging camp. The dirt road continued on for about a hundred and fifty yards, sloping down sharply, ending at a big pond where they intended to get rid of the armored car.

According to Travis, the pond was about thirty feet deep. Womack got out of the tractor and walked down by the edge of the water. It was very muddy. A couple of ducks floated near a marsh on the far side.

Womack walked back up the slope. His shoes left dark pock marks in the wet dirt. They would have to be careful about that.

Before he got back to the rig, Lila drove into the clearing, parked the Thunderbird under the overhanging branches of a tall pine tree. The camp was surrounded by pines. They reminded him of the pines that grew around the CCC camps where he worked for a few years after leaving the reform school.

The big double doors of the van were still closed. Womack pounded on the metal with his fist. There was no sound from inside.

"Travis!"

Still no sound.

"White!"

Womack got the .45 from the tractor, pumped a shell into the chamber, and approached the doors. They had risen quite a few feet from the floor of the desert and there was a chill in the air.

Womack was aware of Lila standing beside him.

"What's happened?" she said.

"I don't know."

"Why don't they open the doors?"

"I don't know."

Standing there in the clearing, Womack was touched by fear, enveloped by it. But there was only one thing to do, and he did it.

As the doors opened, a stifling wave of carbon monoxide poured out. Coughing and chocking, they stared incredulously into the van. Then Lila screamed shrilly. The sound of it came down like a club on Womack's head. He slapped her and the scream broke off in the middle, punctuated by the sudden, stifling silence.

They were dead—all of them: White, sprawled face down just inside the van; the young security guard, staring unblinkingly through blood-spattered goggles; the armored car driver; and Travis —entangled in the canvas money sacks he had been removing from the truck, his thin face twisted and blue.

"Go back to the car," Womack said.

Without a word Lila turned and walked away over the blanket of pine needles.

Womack's mind was suddenly alert. He would have to work fast. Climbing up into the van, he removed the remainder of the money sacks from the armored car, put the two bodies inside with the guard. When he jumped back to the ground there was a sticky mess on his fingers.

It took a full five minutes to back the van down to the edge of the pond. The slope was very muddy. Muck rose up over the rear wheels, but he continued backing slowly, until the van was actually part way out in the water.

He had to wade through water up to his knees in order to get inside the van again. The work wasn't easy. But he managed. When the heavy planks were in position, they formed a ramp leading right down into the water. Starting the engine and shifting into reverse, he backed the armored car until the rear wheels were part way down the ramp. Then he pulled on the emergency brake and got out. He made sure the front wheels were straight. Then he opened the door, released the brake, and shut it quickly. The car rolled down into the water, descending very slowly at the last, but continuing down until it was finally out of sight.

Womack climbed back in the tractor and lit a cigarette. His fingers shook. He gritted his teeth. The worst of it was over. There would be deep tire tracks on the slope, and he would have to be careful to smooth them away, but except for that he was finished.

He took a few drags on the cigarette and started the engine.

*The rig wouldn't move!*

Again and again he tried to gain

some traction on the muddy slope, but the tractor only sank deeper into the muck, as if something below the surface of the mud were trying to devour the rig.

Womack shut off the engine. His clothes were soaked. He shivered. He could feel nothing at all. The crowns of the pine trees made a scratching noise in the wind. After a while Womack got out of the rig abruptly and walked over to the Thunderbird.

Lila looked as if she might faint. She was very pale. He opened the door and got in beside her. For a while there was no sound but the swish of the trees. Then Womack said, "The rig is stuck. I can't get it back up the slope."

She didn't answer. It was as if she hadn't heard. She hesitated a moment and said, "Are you sure they were all . . ."

"Dead?" he said acidly.

"Yes." He realized that it was the first time they had really spoken since that night in the cafe. "Both guards. And White. One of the guards shot him twice . . ."

"And Sammy?"

"Sammy, too." He didn't tell her how Sammy had died. He didn't want to talk about it. He said, "What now?"

"I don't know."

"We could head north. San Francisco, maybe."

"We?"

"Of course."

She looked at him, amazed.

"Listen." Womack's mouth was grim. "We're in this thing together. Until we get in the clear . . . if we ever do . . . we might as well stick together."

"Why?"

He hesitated a moment. "Because I'd feel safer if you were with me."

"You mean you don't trust me."

"I'd feel safer, that's all."

"And the money?"

"The money belongs to us now."

"I want half." There was a strange tone in her voice. She looked at him suspiciously.

"Are you crazy?"

"No." Her mouth was grim when she answered. "The money is the only thing that matters to me now. I figure I'm entitled to half. I want it. Suddenly I want it more than anything in the world."

Womack said hesitantly, "We can work that out later."

"And in the meantime?"

"It's like I told you." He reached over and removed the keys from the ignition of the car. "In the meantime we stick together."

Womack walked back to the rig. It was getting dark. He transferred the money from the sacks to several of the cardboard cartons that had contained food. It gave him a strange sensation to actually handle the money and he swallowed once from emotion.

Using his flashlight, he removed the registration papers and license plates from the rig and tossed them

out into the center of the pond. With a hammer and chisel he mutilated what identifying marks he could find on the engine. He would never be able to prevent them from tracing the rig, he knew, but this way he might delay them for days —weeks maybe.

There were six cartons of money. Womack made six trips between the Thunderbird and the rig. By then it was completely dark. The silhouette of the pine trees emerged pitch black against a sky sprinkled with stars.

Womack removed two suitcases from the trunk of the car and put them on the back seat. It was very cold and he began to shiver. He put the money cartons in the trunk.

Lila was smoking quietly when Womack got into the car. He studied her face; in spite of the darkness he could make out her expression, and her calmness impressed him.

She said, "There are some clean khakis in the suitcase. You had better get out of those wet trousers."

"I'll stop at a filling station on the road." He started the engine. "Right now I want to get out of this place."

In the beam of the headlights, the rig looked like a giant ox stuck in a mudhole, waiting patiently to die.

Womack could not shake off the feeling of sadness as he spiraled down the mountain road to the highway.

## 22.

The first thing they did was get rid of the Thunderbird. It was in Lila's name—a gift from Sammy. They traded it for a three-year-old Ford and eleven hundred dollars cash. Actually, they needed the money. It would be a long while before they would want to touch any of the cash from the robbery.

The used car dealer helped Womack transfer the cartons of money. When he had loaded the last one in he wiped his fat, bespectacled face and said, "What are you carrying in there . . . bricks?"

"Yeah." Womack smiled at him. "Bricks."

The trunk wouldn't close all of the way. They had put the suitcases in also. Womack waited while the salesman got a ball of heavy twine, then fastened the trunk lid securely, trying not to work too fast —trying not to give the impression of someone in hasty flight.

They gased up in town and had a quick meal. When they emerged from the cafe, Lila stopped abruptly, rummaged through her purse. When she had found what she wanted, she scrawled the words *Just Married* in cherry red lipstick on the door of the car. Then she repeated the message on the opposite side.

"There," she said, smiling thinly, and returned the lipstick to her purse. "Who would ever think we were a couple of criminals?"

Womack looked at her, tried to read some other meaning in her eyes, discovered nothing.

Two hours later they turned onto Highway 101, headed north toward San Francisco. It was getting late and there was a slight fog. Womack could hear the ocean breaking on the beach to his left. The sound was like a drumbeat. He could feel his lips compressed to a taut line. His shoulders ached. He thought, *relax. Get a grip on yourself. The worst is over. From now on in, things are going to be rosy as hell . . .*

Lila stirred beside him. She had tried closing her eyes but whenever she did she saw the huddled figures on the floor of the van. The image frightened her. She had never before seen a dead man. She felt a sudden chill. She had put a coat on over the playsuit and she pulled the collar around her throat.

Deliberately, she looked at the man next to her, wondering at the events that had brought them together. They hadn't spoken since leaving Riverside. She found that she wanted to talk. She said, "Do you know anyone in San Francisco?"

"No. It will be better if we don't."

"What will we do?"

"I don't know." He said nothing for several moments. Then: "Find someplace to live."

"You take it for granted that I will live with you?"

"Why not?"

She looked at him silently. Then she said calmly, "If you don't know why not, you're a bastard."

He remained silent, saying nothing.

She looked at him. It was almost as if Sammy were beside her. She wondered if all men were the same. Her mind concentrated on the men she had known—her father, the ugly years with him in the small, cluttered waterfront apartment. The few casual boy friends. Sammy.

There was a hollow, drawn feeling in her stomach. She searched for an explanation. When she could find none she began to cry softly.

Womack noticed her crying and said, "What's the matter?"

"Can't you see?" Her voice was distant. "I'm frightened."

"Don't worry."

"I can't help it."

"Go ahead and cry, then. It'll do you good."

"They're going to catch us."

"That's crazy."

"No it's not. We can't possibly carry this much money around without being caught. Boxes of it. It's so . . . unbelievable . . . somehow."

"We'll hide the money."

"It won't do any good," she said tonelessly.

"Dammit! Knock it off. We've got no choice now." His anger surfaced quickly and then subsided. He said quietly, "We're both tired. We should stop for the night."

They lapsed back into silence. The fog grew thicker. He could no longer make out the sand dunes to the left of the road. But he could still hear the ocean, and the wind had an odor of seaweed.

In Santa Barbara they looked for a place to stay. The first four motels were full. The fifth one had a room left and he registered as man and wife. It was a small room, but clean, with twin beds.

"It's the only one they had," he said when they were inside.

"Is it?"

Her sarcastic tone unsettled him.

He said, "I stopped because I thought you were tired. We can drive all night for all I care."

She gave a forced laugh.

Angrily, he turned and went into the bathroom. When he returned, a few minutes later, the room was empty. The door stood open. He cursed savagely and ran outside, his face white as plaster, his head filled with one thought.

She sat waiting for him, the engine running, headlights cutting yellowly through the fog. He got inside and was slammed against the seat as she jerked the car forward. In a moment they were back on the highway.

"You could have driven off without me," Womack said.

"I know."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I wanted you with me."

Her voice sounded different. Her face, too, was different. He studied her face. It really was, he thought, remarkably beautiful. The passing headlights and the wind coming in through the open window played tricks in her hair. He wanted to touch it, to feel it against his face, and he discovered that it wasn't just the money that made him glad she had waited.

He wondered if she had meant what she said. That she had wanted him with her . . .

Womack looked back at the road and saw the car. It came at them out of the fog. It wasn't until the headlights were almost on top of them that he realized that Lila wasn't in her own lane, that she was heading straight for the other car, so close that there was no time even to turn the wheel.

During the last few seconds, even as the darkness washed its black waves over and around him, the questions formed in his mind.

Was it an accident? Had she gotten confused in the fog?

*Or was this the reason she had waited for him . . .*

23.

Later, the police estimated that nearly a thousand dollars had been picked up by the thrill-seekers who stopped to look at the wreckage. But the rest of it was recovered by an alert state trooper who found the cardboard cartons in a shallow gully about thirty feet from the point of impact.

The trooper—his name was Carter—locked the money into the trunk of the patrol car and radioed into headquarters. He was instructed to make a thorough search of the area.

Another patrol car pulled off the highway behind Carter. He knew the two troopers who emerged. He told them about the money as they moved down into the gully.

The Ford sedan lay on its side. Most of the people crowded around it. The front end was completely pushed in. The trunk lid had sprung open.

"Anyone alive?" one of the troopers asked.

Carter said, "The woman in the Ford keeps moving. We'll have to wait for the wrecker so we can cut 'em loose."

The trooper shone his light on the lipstick-scrawled writing. He whistled through his teeth.

"Poor bastards." They heard a moan from inside the car. "But in a way it was a break for us."

"Huh?"

They walked over to where an old-model pick-up truck lay on its back. The body of a man was pinned underneath. The body of another man lay under a blanket nearby.

Carter shone his light on the man under the truck. He wasn't a man, really; just a kid, barely out of his teens. Carter said, "If it hadn't been for the accident, we might never have caught them."

"It don't seem possible, somehow."

"What doesn't?"

"That a couple of juvenile delinquents could pull off one of the biggest heists of the century . . . *and with a broken-down pick-up.*"

They walked back up to wait for the wrecker.

# MANHUNT

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